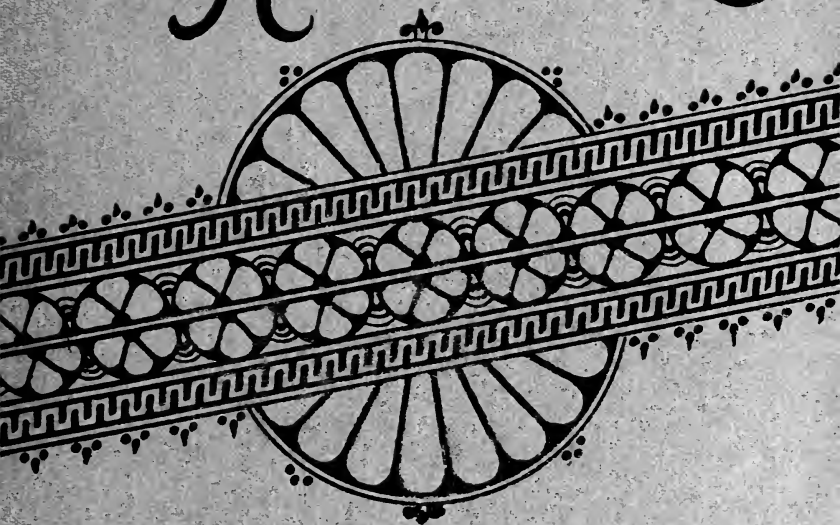
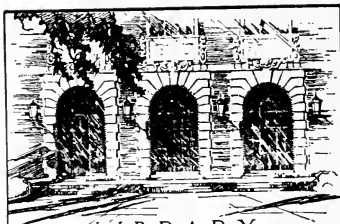


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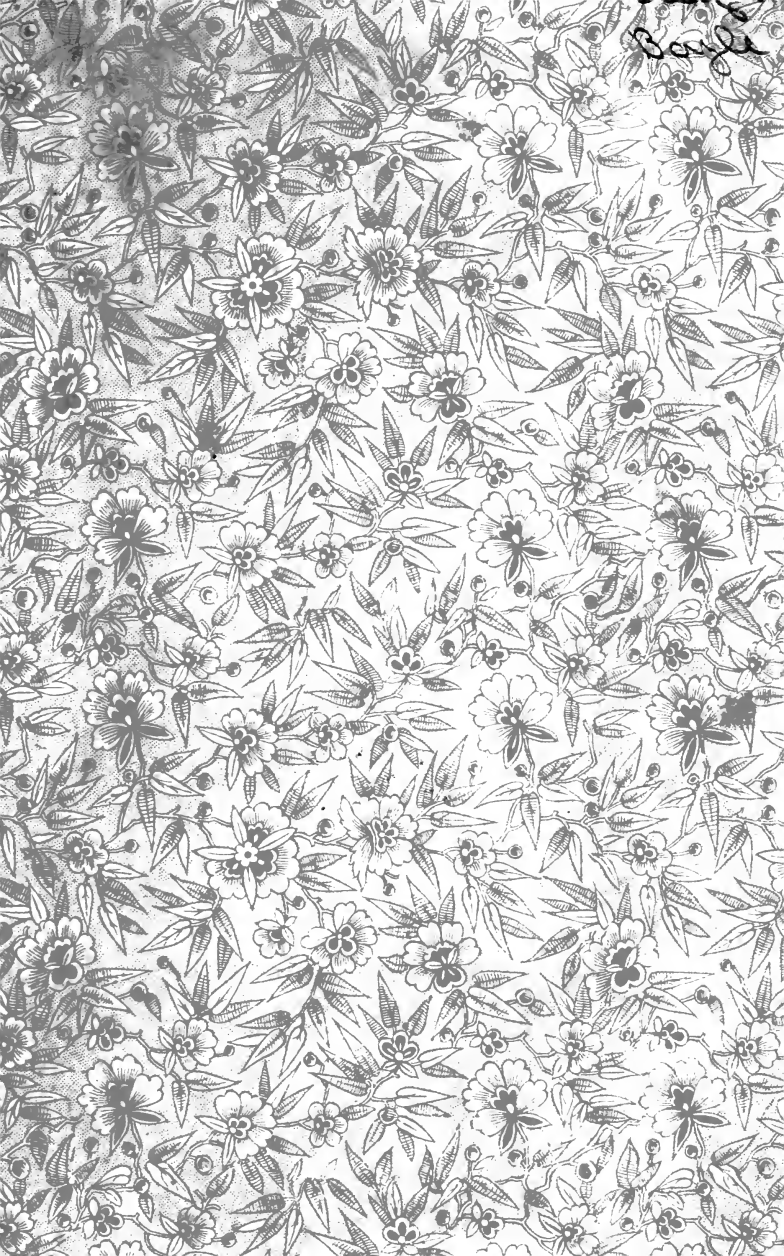
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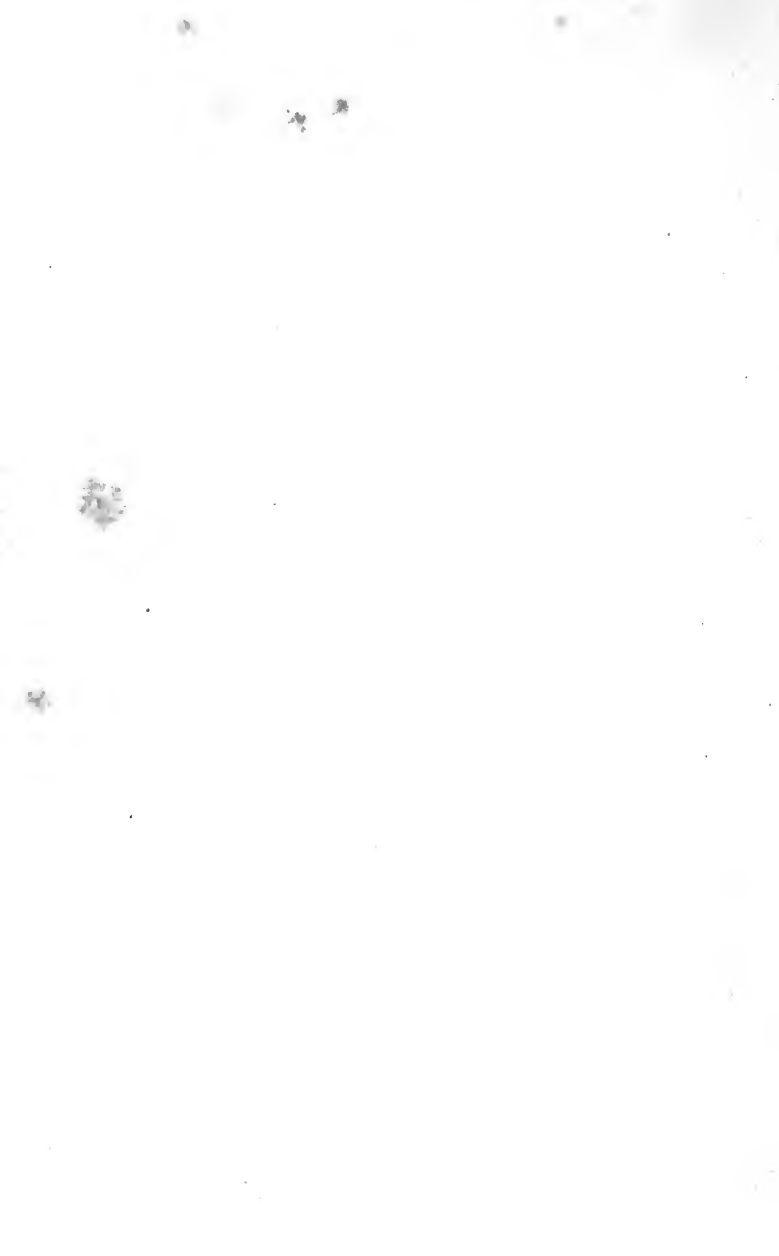
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# HAVING AND HOLDING;

A Story of Country Life.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

BY

J. E. PANTON,

AUTHOR OF

"FROM KITCHEN TO GARRET," "THE CURATE'S WIFE,"  
ETC., ETC.

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VOLUME III.

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LONDON :

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1890.



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*TO B. S.,*

*IN MEMORY OF MANY TRAMPS AMONG  
THE FULBROOK HILLS.*



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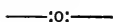
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# HAVING AND HOLDING;

*A STORY OF COUNTRY LIFE.*



## CHAPTER I.

A NEW WAY TO PAY OLD DEBTS.

WHEN May came in with her wealth of wild flowers and her beautiful soft rains and warm sunshine, Jacinth began to feel that the long deferred collapse of her finances could not be staved off very much longer.

Already one or two of her more importunate creditors had applied to Lord William to pay for some of the wonderful furniture which had transformed Windyholme and the Chelsea flat into bowers of beauty; and this had occasioned such a fearful amount of disagreeable comment from her husband, and despite

her usually fearless demeanour, had caused her to tell so many white lies about the rest of her bills, that Jacinth was at her wits' end; more especially as after paying for the chairs and tables, her husband had taken all money matters into his own hands, and had, after offering to put her straight and start her fair, reduced the ample amount which had passed through her account at the Bank to a pittance of £500 a year, out of which she must dress herself and provide herself with any personal pleasures she might require.

If she could only have had the courage to tell the truth and have had her bills paid, this would have, of course, been more than ample, but this she had been idiotic enough not to have done, and she had concealed one or two big bills for finery, of which she was most heartily ashamed, and which she considered if her husband knew of, he would despise her so utterly, she could never hope to have his trust or affection again.

Jacinth was already beginning to feel that she had recklessly thrown away her chances

of a happy married life. She had been so certain that she should have conquered her husband and talked him out of his "foolish fads" into a more pleasant way of living, that up to the present moment she had never realized how much stronger and better Lord William was than she. She had relied on his love for her, his pride in her, being stronger than his fancy for the schemes in which she could see no good, and loathed from the very bottom of her soul ; and when she found that nothing she could say or do would move him, and that he heartily despised her extravagant ways, and her somewhat common attachment to the *Wasp*, she resented more than ever her enforced retirement at Windyholme, and began to scheme how she could emancipate herself from a state of imprisonment which she declared vehemently and constantly would drive her wild.

Lord William watched her far more carefully than she expected ; and much as he grieved over her duplicity, he knew all about

the unspoken of bills, and looked forward to the time when Jacinth should have learned her lesson entirely, and when she should acknowledge that she must come to him for the help she had refused at first so disdainfully ; then he trusted she would see how foolish her conduct was, and would be only too glad to settle down quietly at Windyholme, helping him manfully in the village, which was succeeding beyond his wildest desires, and which had prepared the way for his bill on the nationalisation of the land even quicker than he had expected it to do, for he had demonstrated that such villages could pay their way, and that compulsory cultivation of the soil would yet save the country from the desolation which had fallen upon it. And when great men came down to Windyholme, and saw how all was administered for the good of the greatest number—how the children were taught, and the houses built, and the men set to work—Jacinth listened despite herself, and felt she could have been contented had not the swimming baths represented her

season in town, and the schools carried off what would have given her new stables, horses and carriages, and allowed her to entertain in such a manner that, despite themselves, the Fulbrook aristocracy should be compelled to call, in order to share in the gaieties that went on.

But Fulbrook—poor poverty-stricken Fulbrook—was more savage than ever. If Lord William had failed, if his cottages had tumbled down, his convalescent home collapsed, leaving the hillsides to the pheasants and rabbits, which were Fulbrook's little gods, Fulbrook might have magnanimously forgiven him. But that he should succeed, that he should bring down good men on the Conservative side to see his success and approve of it, seemed so utterly abominable, that Fulbrook spoke more unkindly than ever of the Petersfields; and Mr. Talbot—contemplating the decay and dreary waste land that he could not afford to cultivate, and would not sell to save his life, even had the law of entail not barred the way—began to realise that

legislature might actually compel him to part with his acres, and that his dog-in-the-manger existence might be shortened by the passing of Lord William's bill, about which all the world was talking, despite the fact that no one knew exactly what the provisions of the bill were to be.

But Fulbrook's time of suspense was nearly over ; for a night was set aside for the speech in which Lord William was to introduce the bill, which he had gone to London to see through the hands of the printers ; and Jacinth had already had several very urgent notes from Mr. Seymour, begging her to send him every scrap of information she could on the subject, saying that each atom of intelligence was worth a Jew's eye, and should be substantially rewarded when she received her monthly cheque from the proprietors of the *Wasp*, who, being the regulation Tories of the old school, were apt to be a little put out with Mr. Seymour's antics, and were desperately anxious that he should do his utmost to ridicule and, if possible, put a stop

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to a scheme that must revolutionise the whole of the Empire, and utterly uproot the selfish owners of the land, who would not part with an inch, albeit they had long ceased to be able to cultivate it themselves, or find confiding farmers who could make them a present of their capital, and pay them a handsome rent into the bargain. But, unfortunately for Jacinth, Lord William could keep his own counsel, and was too much aware of the *Wasp's* tactics to leave his wife the power to harm him or his bill. He was very patient ; he meant Jacinth to love him ; he meant her to feel he knew what he was about ; and that in the future he meant to have the life he would have had from the day of their marriage, if he could have done so ; and, in consequence, not one word had passed his lips about the clauses of the bill ; while, if Jacinth secretly resented his silence, she was as secretly thankful that it was out of her power to give Mr. Seymour the information he so much desired ; more especially as some of the money would have been just what she

required to stand between her and the irate tradespeople, who had begun to threaten where before they had only civilly requested payment.

Indeed, on the day on which Lord William expected to run down from town for a few hours to spend Sunday at Windyholme, before the momentous Thursday on which his bill was to be introduced, Jacinth had come quite to her wits' end, for the morning's post had brought her the unpleasant surprise of a lawyer's letter, which demanded the instant payment of £800, or gave the disagreeable alternative of immediate legal proceedings; and she had not as many shillings to her credit at the local bank as the lawyer demanded pounds!

She was sitting in the deep chair in the beautiful hall, the arrangement and furnishing of which had been the beginning of her troubles, and was ruefully contemplating her banker's book, as if the mere sight of that disappointing volume would help her, when there came a ring at the bell. The door was



wide open, as usual, and when the clamour caused by the unwonted noise and the acknowledgment by the dogs of a visitor's presence had somewhat died away, Jacinth looked up from her study and saw someone she did not know in the least standing and gazing in at her. She was about to rise and ring the bell for the servants, who never by any chance took the smallest notice of the other bell unless they knew no one was in the hall, when the man came forward, and, in a low tone of voice, asked if he had the honour of speaking to Lady William Petersfield.

Wild thoughts of sheriffs' officers, and remembrances of all she had read in novels of the serving of writs, coursed through Jacinth's brain, and made her heart beat wildly ; but she had scarcely acknowledged her identity in a most trembling voice, when the messenger handed her a note, and with a low bow went off as quickly as he possibly could ; when Jacinth tore it open, and discovered it was an urgent request from Francis Seymour to

come as soon as she possibly could to the fir-plantation on the top of Carbarrow, as he wished to see her on a matter of the utmost importance. At first Jacinth resented the notion of being at Mr. Seymour's beck and call, and her pride rebelled at the idea of a secret meeting, like a housemaid would have with her young man; but a glance at her desk reminded her that she would be thankful for anything that could make her forget, for even a few moments, the unpleasantness of her morning's correspondence; and snatching up her hat and calling to the dogs, she went off up the hill, and soon caught sight of Mr. Seymour leaning on the stile, whistling softly to himself, and tapping his boot impatiently with his cane. He stopped whistling and came eagerly towards her.

"I can't think what your idea of me must be," he said quickly, after the first greetings were over; "but it is of the utmost importance that I should see you. Of course, you know that next Thursday is the day, and I hear that to-night Lord William brings down the

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bill in his bag, printed and complete. Now, I suppose it's an insult to offer you money, but we will give £1,000 down for a sight of that bill. We want to spoil Lord William's project. If he produces that bill and explodes it like a bomb-shell on the House, his eloquence and his mere impudence will pass the first reading with such a majority that the Lords will not dare to throw it out. The present Ministry is so strong that an appeal to the country will only return them with an increased majority, and that will never do. Now, what we want is this: we want the text of the bill to-night, or to-morrow, at latest, and we shall then print that in Tuesday's *Wasp*, with such comments, or series of comments, as may throw most ridicule on the whole affair, that it may be laughed out of existence before even the poor thing is born. But to do this, to kill at the birth the most pernicious and dangerous measure that was ever produced in England, we must know Lord William's propositions, and we must see the bill itself. Can you let me have it? If so, you know your reward."

"You wish me to steal the bill from my husband?" asked Jacinth, indignantly. "I am not a thief, Mr. Seymour."

"I never thought you were," replied Mr. Seymour, easily, "and I don't want you to steal, only to borrow. An hour will be quite long enough for me to copy it down in shorthand, the rest will be done at the office. Here are £1,000 in notes. I am too astute, you see, to bring down one of the office cheques, which would have been much handier and safer. These shall be yours just for a sight of the bill; beside, don't you hate all this tomfoolery as much as we do, and would you not do your utmost to save the country from such suicidal measures, and your husband from earning the well-deserved curses of every man who may own land, and wishes to keep it, and yet won't be able to unless he is as fanatical as is your spouse? Not only will you benefit yourself, but you will make the fortune of the paper, and you will save England from a social revolution; but, of course, if you approve of the measure I can say no more,

and I'll only ask you to forgive me ;" and so saying, Francis Seymour folded up the notes, and began to put them back in his pocket-book.

All at once Jacinth recollected the lawyer's letter. Here were the means to escape from her dreadful difficulty, and at the same time to emancipate herself from the fate that must be hers for ever, should Lord William find himself and his ideas backed up by the House. If, however, such ridicule were poured upon the measure that it must fairly die of being laughed at—and the *Wasp's* powers in that line were not to be despised—she seemed to see Lord William throwing all up in disgust, then travelling as she longed to travel for a year or two, and finally settling down to the London existence which she had long felt was the only one she cared to live. Mr. Seymour appeared to understand what was passing through her mind ; indeed, the legal epistle which had caused Lady William so much dismay had been in some measure inspired by him as a means of paving the way for his request. The possession of the first

information about the bill would undoubtedly make the fortune of his paper; and to raise the *Wasp* to the fore front of journalism, we do not hesitate to declare Mr. Seymour would cheerfully have sold himself and all his belongings to Mephistopheles without the smallest pang; while he honestly hated the bill with a rancorous hate, and was sufficiently a believer in himself to feel confident that he had nothing to do but publish the text of the bill, with appropriate comments, to extinguish Lord William's hopes, and the chances of passing a measure that he really dreaded as much as if the *Wasp* were land and the bill interfered with his own management of his property. At last he said, as he carefully watched Lady William's face :

"What are you afraid of?"

"Heaps of things," replied Jacinth. "There is such a thing as loyalty to one's husband, to begin with, and what do you suppose will become of me when next Tuesday's *Wasp* comes out? Of course, Lord William will find out all about it, and then fancy what will

be my fate ! Even supposing," she added, quickly, "that for one moment I could think of doing such an awful deed, do you not think the dread of the future would somewhat deter me from the proposed theft ?"

"Loan ; not theft," insisted Mr. Seymour, gently. "Don't fancy, for one instant, I want to steal ; beside, I have taken the utmost care that no one has seen me come or go. I came from the Isle of Wight in our proprietor's launch, landed down below, then sent one of our own staff with a note to you. You would be the very last person to be suspected, and, of course, we should have our own story of the mysterious manner in which the bill came into our hands. The printer or copying clerk would be the victim, and we should take care he didn't suffer really. No ; you get me the sight of the bill—here is the money—and you will hear no more on the subject. Rely on me to see you safely through the storm ; after which, I fancy, you won't see much more of Windyholme, and the village will go to pot, or some other equally appropriate

situation ; and you will be able to say your income's your own, which, I take it, isn't the case just now." And once more Francis Seymour undid his roll of notes, and offered them to Jacinth, watching her intently as she wavered, and then finally said :

" How am I to manage all this? I suppose you know that all Lord William's private papers are in his despatch-box, and that I haven't the very vaguest idea where he puts his keys. I know there's always a terrible amount of locking in and out."

" You listen to me exactly, and I'll tell you what he does," said Mr. Seymour, quietly handing her the notes, which her hand closed on almost involuntarily. " First of all, the key is a Chubb, and I have managed to get it copied exactly, no matter how ; I don't stick at trifles when my blood is up. All you have to do is to insert that key in the box, take out the bill, hand it to me out of the dressing-room window at Windyholme, and put it back again after an hour. As Lord William locks up the key of the despatch-box in another,



and then seals the key of that in an envelope, which he again hides somewhere else, you can imagine he won't suspect anyone in the house ; and I believe I am right in saying that once he is asleep nothing short of the fall of the house would rouse him until the morning, more especially after his dinner and his long journey ; if not, a little opium——”

“I really am beginning to qualify for a place in the *Police News*,” said Jacinth, bitterly. “I can't be such a wretch ; here is the money.”

“Forget the money altogether,” said Francis, closing his fingers round hers and folding all up together. “The money is a mere *pis aller*. What you have to consider is your country and yourself. The money may serve to buy you some memento of one of the noblest acts ever done by woman. It will require some courage to rifle the despatch-box at midnight, creep out to the window, and wait for the return of the document ; and you deserve something to remind you of that. The money is nothing ; do your best to serve your country and yourself. What

will become of you if you have another winter at Windyholme, deprived of everything that makes a country life bearable, and condemned to a round of cottage visiting and baby-tending? Besides, Jacinth; forgive me, Lady William," he added, as he noticed her cheek flush; "forgive me if I ask you how your husband has treated you? Has he not cut off every comfort, condemned you to solitary confinement here, and, in fact, disregarded every wish, in order to indulge in fads that are as injurious to the world at large as they are ludicrous to us who are onlookers? If he had considered you at all, or treated you with the confidence a wife deserves, and, as a rule, obtains, then I would say nothing; but he has driven away your oldest friends as if they were dogs, and has shut you up here until you are a complete prisoner. Under these circumstances, there is nothing before you except moral death, unless you rise superior to a woman's natural dislike to thwart her husband even in his dangerous moods and designs, and emancipate yourself and save

him too before he qualifies himself for a lunatic asylum, which will be his end unless his ideas receive a check in time."

The recital of her wrongs roused Jacinth, as Mr. Seymour had intended it to do. She was a prisoner, she was deprived of her income, and treated like a child by the man who had sworn to protect and love her, and, above all, to endow her with all his worldly goods. She was in great straits for money; she dare not appeal to a husband who had boldly stated that he would dispute in open court the next bill she contracted; and as she recollected with a cold shiver some of the items in the long account for which she was being pressed, and thought how delightful it would be to send off the money at once, her last straw of opposition vanished; and with an effort she said, "I will do it, Mr. Seymour; first of all because you promise me this will save my country, and, secondly, to emancipate myself, but on one condition, that never under any circumstances will you allow yourself to mention the matter to me again;

that no one but you and I shall ever know how the information was obtained, and, that you will solemnly swear never to ask me to help you to any more news for the *Wasp*. If you can and will give me this assurance, I will follow your instructions, and, if I possibly can, will hand you out the bill this evening after Lord William is in bed ; but how can this be managed ? The windows are at least fifteen feet from the ground, and the dogs are always about."

"Oh ! that will be all right," said Mr. Seymour, easily. "I'll square the dogs, they know me well enough, and all you've got to do is to tie the bill to a long string and let it down to me, draw this up again, and exactly at the expiration of an hour come to the window. If I am there I'll give a note or two of the nightingale voice, which I can imitate exactly. That there are never any in Fulbrook won't matter ; if anyone hears me, no doubt it will form excellent material for a paragraph to the local paper."

"Oh ! don't make a joke of it all, for Heaven's sake !" said Jacinth, pressing her

hands together. "After all, it is a crime, put it how you like, and only the irony of fate makes me accept the position. Here am I, rich, happy, young, much to be envied, in the eyes of the world, and yet about to do a dastardly deed just because I am worried to death for money, and because——"

"Because, as I remarked before, you want to save England," interrupted Mr. Seymour, airily. "However, Lady William, we have now settled how to manage, and I think I ought to be climbing down yonder precipice to the launch, or the prying eyes of Fulbrook may see our meeting, which is a thing I cannot afford, even if you could. Do remember, the deed you are to do is really as fine a one as that done by a soldier who leads a forlorn hope. The only thing in it that is trying to you is the fact that you are about to deceive your husband. I wonder how often he has deceived you? Anyhow, don't look on that side of the picture, contemplate a fairer one, and in the meantime let me advise you to pay in that money at once to the

bank. You haven't much time, and it's a long drive to Barford. What time, by the way, is Lord William expected?"

"About four, I think," said Jacinth, wearily, gathering up her skirts; and then holding out her hand, she added, "Good-bye; the next time we meet I shall be heartily ashamed of myself; however, I suppose there is no help for it."

"None at all," replied Mr. Seymour, shaking hands warmly with her; "now good-bye. At twelve precisely, midnight, to make the matter as romantic as we can." And so saying, he ran down over the cliff-side and was soon lost to sight, while Jacinth walked steadily back to the house clutching her precious money, and the moment she got home she sank into the chair and burst into a passion of tears; for gloss it over to herself how she would, she was obliged to confess herself a criminal, and one of the worst dye, inasmuch as she was about to steal from her own husband.

But, long before she had returned from Barford, where she had paid in the bank notes, to the wide-eyed astonishment of the bank

manager, who had his own ideas on the subject of Lady William's account, and who did not mind talking over those ideas at the bar of the "Lion," should occasion offer, she had wrought herself into a state of righteous indignation ; for, on meeting her husband at the station, she had been kept waiting half-an-hour, while he saw to the unloading of a couple of wonderful invalid carriages and a pair of steady horses, provided, as she knew without asking, for the use of the convalescent home inmates, while her share in the phaeton was considerably straitened by an enormous deal box, which her husband informed her, brightly, contained a perfect microscope, slides and all complete, for the use of the village, and the square leather despatch-box, at which she looked guiltily, as she remembered angrily the part she had to play and which she now felt more than ever was forced on her by the meanness of her husband, who grudged her the smallest pleasure, but could not spend or do too much for the wretched village, which she now fondly

hoped would be blown into the air and shattered into ten thousand fragments by the bombshell she was about to launch into its midst. For she, like Mr. Seymour, believed most thoroughly in the power of the Press ; and believed, too, that the whole scheme must fall to pieces, if only it were presented to the public prematurely and with all the force that malignant pens could give to the comments which should be published simultaneously with the text of the bill. Jacinth was as cross as she could be, and as snappish as nervousness and fright can make a woman, and Lord William turned from her with a sigh, as she answered all his remarks briefly and angrily, and did not warm up in the least ; albeit he announced his intention of taking her to town on the Monday to his mother's for the week which was to mean so much for him. At first Jacinth declared nothing should make her go. She had no clothes ; she had been so long from London she should not know how to behave, she feared ; and secretly she thought she would rather be at



home alone when the *Wasp* was published ; but Lord William simply said that his mother expected her, and that she must come ; and drew up his horses at Windyholme with little of the pleasure he had hoped to feel when he returned home to rest after the battle and heat of life in London.

“All well in the village, I hope?” he said, as he took up his letters and looked through them with the slight interest felt by anyone surrounded by all they care for, and who have no bills to be paid.

“I don’t know anything about the village,” replied Jacinth. “I do wish you’d understand that. Tell me, rather, about London ; what is going on, and what your people are doing. Are there any balls on next week anywhere?”

“They are all too busy to think of balls,” said Lord William, sinking down into Jacinth’s chair and trying to draw her towards him—an action she immediately resented, and protected herself from by seating herself on the distant window-sill. “How cross you are, Jacinth, my dear. One would think you

would be delighted to see me back after four days' absence, and, instead of that, you seem to resent my appearance. Well, I shall take you with me on Monday, and we'll see what a week of town will do."

"I can tell you what it will do beforehand," exclaimed Jacinth, angrily. "It will make me hate Windyholme more than ever. If one has to live with one's head in a sack one had better always keep it there and never peep out, for returning to it from the light of day makes the sack three times as dreary as it was before. Either take me to London for the season in the way all civilised men take their wives or leave me here altogether. I detest snippets of gaiety and atoms of London: one is out of the swim; one doesn't even understand the conversation one hears, and one is just like a savage unless one really goes to town properly. I don't care to be a country cousin, so I'll stop where I am, or else go for the season altogether."

"If you'd go for the season as my mother or my sister-in-law does all would be well,"

replied Lord William, quietly ; "but you know what the effects of your two seasons have been. I don't want to reproach you or speak of what is past and done with, but I must if you talk again of a season in town. You can't be trusted among the shops, my dear, or you should go with pleasure ; but you know all my anxieties about the village, and I will not have the life-blood drawn from it to supply you with luxuries that are as useless as they are shameful. Promise me to do as the Duchess does, and you shall have your flat to-morrow, but not to furnish it and go about as you have done."

"Why do you want me to go up now?" asked Jacinth, flushing with passion as her husband's quiet voice told her that he meant what he said.

"I want you to go because next week is a most important one for me, and because all wives, in my mother's eyes, should be with their husbands on such occasions as I hope next Thursday will be," said Lord William, sighing. "I don't often bore you with sentiment, dear Jacinth, for I know how you hate it, but I should like to tell you how your

presence in the ladies' gallery will stimulate me, and nerve my arm for the fray, even though I know you hate my plans, and would like to see them frustrated. But in time I know you will be conquered, and give me your sweet help and counsel, and I am content to wait. I am a great believer in time, dearest, as you know."

"A foolish believer," exclaimed Jacinth. "Time will never alter my sentiments. I shall always consider my life spoiled by that wretched fad of yours, and hate it accordingly. Why you married me, or I married you, I can't for the life of me make out."

"Because I loved you, and because you'll love me," replied her husband, composedly. "However, Jacinth, I don't feel inclined for any quarrels now; and, indeed, nothing would induce me to quarrel with my wife. I am desperately tired. I have to see the bailiff, and Bob is coming over to dinner, and I have a thousand-and-one things to do, including a long sitting over my despised bill."

"Isn't it printed yet?" asked Jacinth, her heart beating wildly at such an idea.

“Printed? Oh, yes!” replied her husband, easily. “But there are a hundred-and-one corrections to make, and I want Bob’s advice on several points.”

“You show Bob what you won’t show me,” exclaimed Jacinth, angrily.

“Bob doesn’t speak to the *Wasp*,” replied Lord William, laughing. “You swear off, too, from evil companionship, and you shall have double as much of my confidence as he has ever had, or as anyone has ever had; but until then, my dear, I tell you nothing the whole world may not hear.” And, so saying, Lord William took up his despatch-box, and sauntered off to his own room, where, with but a short interval for dinner, he remained with Bob until it was time for the latter to drive back to Bevercombe to snatch what rest he could before his Sunday work began; while Jacinth, waiting impatiently for her husband to go to his room, thought that the evening would never end, or rather that it would end and Mr. Seymour be waiting for her promise to be fulfilled, long before Lord

William was asleep, and the box placed where she could get at it.

If Jacinth were to live for a thousand years, she would never forget that evening. It was a specially beautiful night in May ; the moon was full, and all round Windyholme was almost as light as day, save and except under the immediate shadow of the house, where the darkness seemed intensified by the bright expanse around. The sea could be heard falling and receding on the stony beach, and every now and then some bird would call to its fellow, or some of those mysterious sounds inseparable from night would fall on her ear, and almost startle her into shrieking wildly from pure nervous fright. At last she heard her husband go to his room, place the heavy box on the chair by the bed, and then in a very few seconds the light which had streamed from his uncurtained window was put out, and she knew that a very few more moments would see him safely locked in that heavy and sudden sleep which was one of his characteristics, and which

never failed him, work as hard as he might, or have as much excitement as he could.

Jacinth slipped off her shoes, and crept guiltily to his chamber. Through the half-open door she could hear his slow, heavy breathing. He was asleep, even quicker than usual. Fate was playing into her hands. She looked at her watch ; it was ten minutes to twelve. No time to be lost. Her trembling hands undid the heavy straps of the box, and her heart beating as she could not have believed it could beat and she yet live, she put the key into the lock, raised the lid, and there, at the very top of the papers, of which the box was full, lay the long, many-folded document she knew by intuition was the thing of which she was in search ; and as if to aid her in her theft the more clearly, the moonlight showed her printed on the front the words : “ Bill for the Proposed Nationalisation of the Land.” She needed no more information, and slipping from the room silently, she went to the dressing-room window and looked out.

As she did so, a man came out of the shadow,

and held up his hands. She had no time to think. She attached the papers to the string, and in a few seconds the bill had passed out of her possession, and her crime was complete.

The short hour for which Francis Seymour had asked lengthened into two before he returned, and without one word attached the papers to the cord. Jacinth drew them up, and caught sight of a tiny scrap of paper, on which was written, "A thousand thanks; worse than our worst fears; you have saved us from a revolution." She secured this, and tore it into a thousand fragments, and then returning to her husband's bedside she hurriedly put in the papers, locked the box, and was just fastening the last strap, when a change in Lord William's breathing told her he was waking. She threw down the end of the strap, and stood motionless by the bedside. His waking was as sudden as his sleep, and she knew she could not escape. He roused himself up and looked at her. "What's the matter, dear? Anything?" he said, anxiously. Then, as the dogs barked, he jumped up and



looked for his revolver, which in that lonely spot was something more than a mere name. Jacinth stopped him. "Nothing is the matter," she said, hurriedly. "I couldn't sleep—and—and—" and she looked embarrassed.

"And so you thought you'd come to see me," said her husband, lightly; "but surely you don't, as a rule, go to bed in your garments, and you are not undressed."

Jacinth looked foolishly at her dress, and then burst into tears.

"There, there," said Lord William, soothing her. "You're afraid of bogey, and sorry you've been such a crabstick to me, I know. Come, Jacinth, get undressed, like a sensible little girl, and come to bed; but kiss me first, and say you're sorry, for long before you're out of your flounces I shall be asleep." And so saying, he drew her towards him, and as Jacinth pressed a feverish kiss on his cheek, she cried still more bitterly, as she remembered she was not the first who had betrayed a great and good man to his doom with a kiss.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE BUBBLE BURSTS.

THE next day or two were days of absolute purgatory to Jacinth. Rarely, if ever, had she seen her husband in such good spirits as he was then, and she could not control the nervous agony which seized her, and made her so irritable that she could hardly remain in the same room with Lord William; who whistled and sang at his work like a boy, and who, even in the long journey to town on the Monday, could hardly sit still, and unrolled, read, and re-read the pages of the great blue document, which Jacinth could not look at without a shudder, until she felt she could tear it from his hands, and throw it out of the window and herself after it.

When she reached the Duchess's house, she had fidgeted herself into such an abject state

of terror, that her mother-in-law gave a start of alarm at the sight of her wan, drawn face, and asked her most anxiously if she had been ill, recommending her at the same time to go straight to bed and not attempt to take part in the dinner engagement for that evening; but Jacinth was far too uncomfortable to remain by herself, and allowed herself to be dressed by the maid, albeit the garment with which she was decked was one of those for which she felt in her heart she had sold her soul.

A wild despair seized her at the idea that she, Jacinth Merridew, could be so contemptible, so absolutely lacking in self-control; and for the first time in her life she remembered her father's fall and how utterly she had condemned him for crimes which might have been committed for the sake of his children, and to make their future bright and happy, while in her own case there had been absolutely no need for her to be so idiotic, so wicked. For him she had had nothing but the most utter hatred, the greatest disgust. She had scorned Bob's tender-heartedness and his

affection for his father's memory ; and here was she in a far worse position than ever he had been. She had absolutely betrayed her own good, indulgent, loving husband into the hands of the enemy ! and for what ? To satisfy the claims of a creditor for such foolishness that Jacinth blushed even in her solitary room, whenever she looked at many of the items of the account ; and though she endeavoured to soothe her conscience by repeating some of Mr. Seymour's arguments, though she pretended her one idea was to save England and herself from being sacrificed to her husband's idiotic fads, in Francis Seymour's absence, when his plausible tongue was no longer heard whispering in her willing ear, she could not conceal from herself that had she not been in the difficulties for money that she undoubtedly was, England and the village too might have taken their chances, as far as she was concerned, for never, never would she have been so wicked had she not been so very sorely pressed.

Indeed, every moment which brought nearer

the explosion that would burst, the moment the *Wasp* was published, seemed to Jacinth as if it were in itself so absolutely horrible, that she should never live until the next day, nor survive that, even if she were yet alive when it dawned ; and when she sat down at the Duchess's dinner-table and looked round at the guests, she could have shrieked as she recollected her position, and knew what they would all think of her should they ever learn the truth ; but that was impossible, of course. Some wretched printer would be the scape-goat, and he would disappear, compensated amply for the momentary trouble that he would experience. It would be a nine days' wonder, naturally, then something else would happen ; she and Lord William would be abroad together, and after a while all would be forgotten, and things would drift into their natural position.

Jacinth was at last aroused from her unhappy reverie by some casual remark from the man who had taken her in to dinner, and once more she was conscious of the Duchess's

grave eyes regarding her anxiously. She recollected with a start that she must not cause people to suspect her of being unlike herself; and, turning to her neighbour, with a laugh at her own abstraction, and a jest about her life in the country rendering her unfit for civilisation, she kept up an animated conversation, and forgot for the time the precipice on the brink of which she was at that moment standing.

At the same time, as the conversation at the dinner table was principally on the two subjects of Lord William's bill and the village, Jacinth was obliged to remember rather more than she cared for, but she was greatly surprised to hear how calmly the bill was discussed, and to notice what an amount of attention her husband appeared to receive, even from those who should have been most bitterly opposed to him. She remarked as much to her companion, Lord Richard Arminal, whose family were Conservatives of the Conservatives and bigotted members of the narrowest minded party in the State.

“You all seem strangely changed since the season before last,” she said, quietly. “Then you would not hear a word from my husband. You all used to laugh at his chimeras ; now you listen to him, not only patiently, but really as if you believed he were right ; and I must confess I cannot understand it.”

“You see Lord William has proved his sword,” replied Lord Richard, easily, “and one can’t help listening to a fellow who has behaved as he has done. I hate to be convinced. I loathe, like we all of us do really, to be forced to be unselfish and consider our brutes of tenants ; but, at the same time, the age advances so quickly that we shall have a revolution, and all the idiotic waste of time and lives which that means, if we don’t look out for ourselves, and legislate accordingly. If we must part with our privileges, I, for one, had rather administer them cheerfully, as your husband does, than have them wrested from me.”

“Why should you expect that they will be wrested from you,” asked Jacinth, smiling at

Lord Richard's attempt to pose as a selfish self-indulgent Sybarite. "Why can't we go on as we have been going for ages, enjoying ourselves, and, at the same time taking care our tenants shall not be neglected? As long as the world lasts, there must be gradations in rank and in money too, and I much prefer to keep things as they are at present. I see no reason for change."

'You cannot go about very much then,' replied Lord Richard. "Do you live entirely in the country, Lady William?"

"Indeed I do, if one can call it living," replied Jacinth. "One sees nothing to suggest change there. I perceive little save stagnation, except in our immediate vicinity, where my husband's village causes activity enough, and that of the most disagreeable kind too. Have you been down to see that charming spot, Lord Richard? If so, you would hear how popular we are in Fulbrook."

"No; I haven't been yet, but I am to come down as soon as we have got the bill through committee," he replied. "Still I know all



about it, as who does not ? and I thought you knew my people have started just such another at Silverside. Yes, at Silverside," he added, laughing at Jacinth's face of horror. " You evidently remember Silverside, with its beautiful tracts of heath land and those lovely birches? My father hated it all at first, worse than I do ; but he is wise enough to accept the inevitable, and, as I said before, to administer instead of waiting to be robbed."

" But why should we have only a choice of evils?" asked Jacinth.

" Because the world has become so plaguy equal, it cannot be helped," he answered ; " and we are being forced by the march of ages to cease to be obstructionists. We must either make way for the masses that those delightful school boards have educated out of the grime and obscurity where the lower classes should be allowed to languish, if I had my own way, or be walked over by them and be reduced to powder. I do not want to be squashed flat, neither do my people, so we are going to follow your husband's advice,

and share our belongings with the *oi polli*; with this difference : what he does cheerfully I do grudgingly, and hating in my heart the folks for whom he has such a love."

"I cannot really and truly understand what you are talking about, or why you are making these changes," said Jacinth, wearily. "It seems to me that the world is just as it has been for years, and I perceive no more need of making ourselves uncomfortable now than there has ever been. Why should we make these alterations in the social scale, I wonder?"

"Because the lower classes are much stronger than they ever were, I am sorry to say," answered Lord Richard. "Because every man who has a grievance insists on being heard, or else writes to a paper which gives him room at once, and half a column on the first page, in addition, of editorial comments—one of the outcomes of teaching such folk to read and write; formerly, not only would they have been unable to put pen to paper, but there would not have been a newspaper for them to write to. Railways,

education, and telegrams, to say nothing of cheap literature, are at the bottom of our present woes. We used to be kings in our own special county, and we could do as we liked with our poachers or our tenants, and we could till the land or let it alone, as it suited us best ; but now, should we send a fellow who steals our game to prison we are called all the names under the sun in some dreadful Society paper : and people read of our crimes, which are always exaggerated, and call us brutes, regardless that we are able to contradict most of the statements in their next issue. They read our statement and the editor's 'apologies,' but speedily forget all but the fact that we have been 'shewn up' in some wretched rag ; and this they never can forget, somehow. Then, if our farms are out of cultivation, down comes some penny-a-liner with a descriptive pen, and, before we know where we are, we are pilloried as wilful wasters of God's precious opportunities, and lectured promptly on the rotation of crops, or the Divine ordination to grow

gooseberries if corn won't pay, by some miserable Cockney, who wouldn't have known a gooseberry-bush from a raspberry-cane unless he had been taken for a day in the country by some charitable institution nourished at our expense. On the whole, and on due consideration," he added, laughing, "I think the Press is the most to blame for our present unhappy position."

"You call your position unhappy, and are yet going to help my husband to make it worse!" exclaimed Jacinth. "You are going to support his bill and lend him all the assistance you can, and yet say you are wretched! Why! you'd be a thousand times worse off when this grandmotherly government of ours takes your property out of your hands and does not allow you a voice in the management of your own estates. Truly, the whole thing is monstrous!"

"You are never an Oppositionist?" asked Lord Richard, in a tone of the greatest astonishment. "You are talking like my mother, who wept for three days and went

down on her knees to my father to beg him to oppose your husband tooth and nail. Poor old Governor! it is hard on him, but he wouldn't hear of the bill being opposed. It's like a black draught, unpleasant at the time, but necessary, and therefore the sooner one takes it the better for us all."

"I don't think you can know what the bill really is," said Jacinth, quietly, "or you would not talk as you do."

"Indeed, we all know pretty well," replied Lord Richard, "and what we don't know, we shall hear on Thursday. Of course, you'll be in the House and hear your husband's speech? What a clever fellow he is, and how proud you must be of him, Lady William! What part do you take in the management of the village? I don't wonder you haven't time to come to town. Even Laura—you remember Laura, don't you?—the belle of the season and the gayest of the gay; my father's pet, too; well, she has gone quite mad over Silverside, and teaches one class of girls to do decorative painting."

“She had better teach them to make shirts and simple dresses, like the Windyholme girls,” said Jacinth; “they have to learn every tiny practical part of a woman’s work before they do anything else, and there I agree with my husband entirely. The school-boards were bringing up a useless lot of women, whose one idea seemed to be to despise honest service and to hanker after independence. Our girls are taught that all are and must be dependent on each other, and in time, no doubt, they will understand this.”

“I must tell Laura what you say,” said Lord Richard. “You must help her a little, and spare a few moments for Silverside; you have so much more experience than she has in these matters.”

“But, please understand me,” interrupted Jacinth. “I have no experience whatever, and I don’t agree with my husband in the very least. It sounds dreadful, I know, and I should not have spoken quite so openly, but you forced it from me. I never go near

the village, if I can help it, and all I tell you is mere hearsay."

"After next Thursday you'll feel very differently," replied Lord Richard, easily. "You'll see what a hero your husband is, and what we all think of him. Cannot you understand," he added, after a moment's pause, "that legislation has become absolutely necessary? and now there is a lull in Ireland, we have time for our own country. You and I might prefer to close the ports, to bring riches to the few and hard days and poor food to the many; but we dare not do it. We have been warned that the people have a voice, and this voice must be listened to. Our best course is the one indicated by your husband. We must nationalize the land, to the extent that if you and I cannot afford to cultivate it, the nation shall do it for us, and it shall be empowered to sell such portions as can be easily cultivated to those who desire to possess them. It shall also form industrial villages on the same plan as the one at Windyholme, and it shall vote money for this purpose from

the purses of those who otherwise would spend all on their own self-indulgence. In time, we all hope to render the country all we have owed it for so long, and in time we trust to bring back to the country all the superabundant life that is choked to death and poisoned in over-crowded, filthy tenements in towns. We have had our chances ; we have been left alone for generations. Now we must be forced to give a helping hand to the poor."

"You are a regular Radical," said Jacinth. "Indeed, I know not where to look for a congenial spirit. Even our two Duchesses are converted, and allow there may be something in my husband's scheme."

"Believe me, ours is the true Conservatism," replied Lord Richard, earnestly. "A Radical would snatch at anything, would distribute our property madly among the least deserving and laziest of the people. He would pull down our churches and level everything ; while we on the other hand look to build up all that is noblest in mankind by using our



advantages for the good of the many. We will build and beautify new churches, and choose our priests with care, as we believe they are God-given centres of the best civilisation. But the day of narrow-minded bigotry is past, and the old country rector, whose sons and daughters thought of nothing but the county and their own intense superiority to anyone outside the rectory doors, will soon be as extinct as the Dodo, and will give place to such men as our East-end parsons have been for the last few years, and to a creed that is far more developed by their lives than by any amount of aimless preaching."

"You will always have one final foe to fight," said Jacinth, wondering to herself at the change which had come over Lord Richard, "and that one you can never, never conquer; I mean the dulness, the awful, awful dulness of the country; nobody interesting, nice, or amusing will ever live there."

"While such charming ladies as yourself and my sister Laura manage to exist there, and while your husband loves it as he does, I

don't despair even on that score," replied Lord Richard, gallantly. "Besides, how is the country especially dull?"

"You won't convert my wife on that subject," interrupted Lord William, laughing. "I have been listening to all your talk, Lord Richard, and have quite expected an explosion. Be thankful you have escaped being withered with sarcasm, and leave the dullness of the country alone. In time it will cease to be dull, and then there will be no need for any arguments in its favour. Once our bill is through both Houses and made law, all our best and brightest folk will come back to the dear, delightful country, and then Lady William will be conquered."

"And suppose the bill doesn't pass?" asked Jacinth.

"It will, it must, it shall!" exclaimed both her husband and Lord Richard together. "Nothing short of sudden death on our parts and the grossest treachery could prevent it from so doing. However," added Lord William, laughing, "I, for one, decline to die ;

and no one can undermine all those who have promised their support. I am confident of success."

"Ah! but don't boast—*unberufen!*" ejaculated Lord Richard, hurriedly. "If only I knew a few more spells I'd utter them; however, let us hope for the best. Oh! Lady William, the Duchess is signalling and you must go, but I shall come to you in the drawing-room and complete your conversion as soon as ever I can;" and so saying, Lord Richard rose, and Jacinth glided out of the room and sought a dark corner of the drawing-room, where she did her best not to think of the *Wasp*, or to ponder on Lord William's bright face and confidence in the success of his plans for the regeneration of the country, a theme which was discussed in every possible manner by the ladies until the men came in, and one by one claimed their better halves and drifted away to some other house, where the same subject was talked over, and nothing else, from all points of view.

When Jacinth woke the next day she opened

her eyes with that miserable sense of intense depression, which sensitive and superstitious folks call a presentiment of something disagreeable being about to happen. At first she could not recollect what it was, and she lay still, listening to the unaccustomed sounds of London, and wondering why, now she was back in her beloved town, she should feel so abjectly and utterly wretched ; she did not, however, meditate long, for her attention was roused by a rapid series of knocks on her door, and to her astonishment she heard the Duke's voice asking if her husband were awake. In a moment she knew the blow had fallen ; some one had come with the *Wasp* in their hands to tell the Duke what was the *pièce de resistance* in that morning's issue of the tabooed paper, and her secret was no longer hers alone.

For a few seconds Lady William felt as if her very last hour had come ; her heart beat, the blood surged through her veins, and she was almost breathless with fright ; but she knew how necessary it was to be cautious, when every word or sign she might make

would be remembered against her ; as naturally her connection with the *Wasp* would most assuredly be the first thought of the whole household ; and after a second's pause, she rose, put on her dressing-gown, and going to the door, opened it gently. "What is the matter?" she asked ; "William is fast asleep ; he was dreadfully tired."

"This is no moment for him to sleep," said the Duke, fiercely ; "tell him to get up at once and come to me."

"But what is it ; is anyone dead?" asked Jacinth, listening intently to her husband's breathing.

"No, but someone will be dead very soon," replied the Duke. At this moment Lord William roused himself, and jumped up.

"What on earth's the matter?" he said sleepily. "It seems to me, Jacinth, you spend most of the night wandering about ;" but he had scarcely concluded his sentence before the Duke cast the newspaper in at the door, and demanded that his brother should look at that, and come to him at once in the

library. Lord William seized the paper, which Jacinth naturally recognised in one moment, and opening it, saw in large type, "Text of the revolutionary measure about to be brought before the House by Lord William Petersfield," and at intervals down the page were those deliciously literary headlines with which the American press has made us so familiar; which indicated to the most casual observer the subjects, not only of the bill itself; but of those special remarks which were supposed by the editor of the *Wasp* to be most appropriate to the present situation.

Jacinth was as white as her dress as she gazed over Lord William's shoulder at the columns of the paper; she could not look at her husband, she simply stood motionless, and almost without sense or feeling, until he had glanced down the long columns, and then once more looked at the head-line, when, to her intense and utter surprise, he burst into a most immoderate fit of laughing; then, as he saw Jacinth's transfixed face, he put

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his arm round her and said, "I feel for you, dear; it is hateful to find out one's old friends are sneaks and ruffians, and that this paper is as dastardly a rag as I told you it was; but I should like to know what your fool of an editor has paid for this? Anyhow, it is delightful to see how splendidly he has been taken in; he has actually printed the whole of my first old bill, the maddest, and as I see now, the most revolutionary thing I ever wrote, and which I have kept by me, simply as a help what to avoid; and here he has the whole thing, with a species of commination service of his own as an accompaniment. Well, the theft and breach of confidence are the same, and I suppose I must thrash the fellow within half-an-inch of his life, and then prosecute the purveyor of this bill to the *Wasp*. However, it will be a real entertainment to know what an egregious ass Seymour has made of himself, even while I am whacking him. Now I must hurry into my clothes. You look at the paper while I dress," and so saying, Lord William rushed into his

dressing-room, while Jacinth sank on the sofa at the bottom of the bed, and gazed at the *Wasp*, without at first seeing one syllable of the obnoxious article.

But presently the whole thing became plain to her, and one by one she saw the clauses of the supposed bill printed, each with what Mr. Seymour had probably thought were appropriate comments on them ; and as she noticed the extreme violence of the criticism and the cruel inuendoes regarding Lord William's good faith in the matter, and the barbed arrows, many of which Jacinth could not help feeling she had helped to wing, which were aimed at his very heart ; she felt how dangerous and abominable was the existence of a paper, whose editor, to keep up its circulation and feather the nest of its proprietors and staff, did not hesitate to publish matter which could only have been procured by stealing, or by a breach of confidence which was utterly appalling to contemplate.

At the same time Jacinth had to recognise that, after all, the matter so obtained had



positively nothing of any value attached to it ; that the bill which was to do so much was absolutely safe in Lord William's despatch-box ; and that the sole result of the premature publication of the supposed bill would be a severe and thorough punishment for Mr. Seymour, and an unhappy consciousness of her own crime, which she felt she must carry with her to her grave. But she had hardly thought of anything beyond the mere fact of the publication, when Lord William was back, and giving her a hasty kiss, and snatching up the paper, rushed down to the library, where the Duke was walking up and down hurriedly, and the two Duchesses were sitting looking at him, his wife with her soft eyes full of tears ; while the Dowager Duchess appeared as if she could herself undertake the thrashing of the editor she had been strongly advocating from the moment the obnoxious paper had been shown her, until her second son came into the room, bearing his copy triumphantly in his hand.

“ I should like to see the fellow's face after

Thursday," he began, brightly. "What an outrageous sell for him, isn't it?"

"Sell!" exclaimed the Duchess, "what do you mean? Of course, I know this wretched nonsense is not yours; but you cannot surely see what all this means, or you would not take the matter so airily as you do at present. And don't you see that all the world will believe, first of all, that Mr. Seymour procured this information from your wife? and, secondly, that this is the true bill, and that the one you produce next Thursday is what this paper has made you cut it down to? Ah! Russia, after all, is the only decent country to live in. There people are kept in their proper place, and one hears nothing there of the freedom of the Press. Is not this enough to make anyone turn tyrant? Such papers as these should be burned at Whitehall, and their editors flogged at the cart's tail." And the Duchess rose to her full height, and threw the copy of the *Wasp*, which she was holding, from her as if it would sting.

Lord William listened to his mother quietly

enough, albeit the blood flushed his forehead at the mention of Jacinth's name. At last he said, 'We'll leave my wife out of the question; she hasn't seen this man for months, and she is above suspicion; and, barring the cart's tail, the flogging shall be done. At the same time, why should we take any notice of the fellow? his one aim is to increase the circulation of the paper, and that he will certainly accomplish, judging from this household at least," and he pointed to the numerous copies of the paper, each member of the family being apparently armed with their own particular copy.

"You cannot pass over such a thing as this quietly," said the Duke, firmly. "I myself don't think for an instant anyone of our real supporters or friends will take any notice, or believe for a moment in this abominable nonsense; indeed, all on whom we depend must have seen and commended every word in your statement, and know that not a syllable of all this appears in the bill you are to lay before the House on Thursday. Still,

there are heaps of country people who take the *Wasp*, and will remember all this against us next election, and, in consequence, we must force the editor to confession or bring an action against the paper. Then, William, it is true what my mother says ; all our world knows Jacinth opposes you, all the world knows of her friendship with the Seymours. She will be suspected of complicity, and for her sake you must get to the bottom of this."

"And so ruin some wretched printer or compositor, who, for the sake perhaps of his starving children or sick wife, has fallen a victim to Seymour's long purse and plausible tongue," interrupted Lord William, angrily. "No one can suspect my wife of being a thief ; to allow that such suspicion could fall on her is in itself an insult, and I will not have her name brought into the matter even here, and I beg of you to leave her out of the discussion altogether. We must talk the business over sensibly and calmly if we can, and settle what is to be done, but I will not hear one word from anyone who speaks of

my wife in the same tone you are adopting towards her. If you can make me any suggestions now, mother, or you either, Dorset, I shall be obliged to you, for I suppose it will hardly do to ignore the whole business, which is really what I should prefer."

"I think our surest step is first to see our lawyer," replied the Duke, "and then to find out from our friends what they advise. True, this wretched rubbish is not yours, but it has been yours. You had the whole thing printed exactly as if you were about to lay it before the House, and you have never taken it out of your private despatch-box, to whom no one has a key save you. There must be a traitor in the printing office, and we must discover him, or some day he will be divulging facts that really are worth paying for, and so do incalculable mischief."

"You must look among recently discharged men then only, if there are any," suggested the Duchess, who was still regarding the paper through her gold-rimmed glasses.

"Why?" asked Lord William.

“Because a man who was still there would know of the second bill,” replied the Duchess, quietly, “and would not have been so foolish as to hand over this.”

“He might have done so, and taken a malicious pleasure in the idea of how useless the explosion would be,” said Lord William, eagerly. “Seymour would not dare complain ; and the man may have pocketed a handsome sum, and salved over his conscience by thinking he had done nothing wrong after all. It is a most vexatious business, anyhow, and I wish the *Wasp* had been at the bottom of the sea before it had interfered with my concerns. You had better go and see Florance, Dorset ; as for me, I’ll pick out a good heavy horsewhip and see how Mr. Seymour likes that. Ah ! Jacinth, my dear,” he added, as his wife came into the room, and quietly took her place by the Duchess, “just in time to help at the council of war. Mr. Seymour was your friend ; you shall have the pleasure of choosing my whip for me ; you’ll know his tastes best.” And, so saying,

Lord William reached down the Duke's collection of whips and sticks from over the mantel-piece, and tried the strength of them all one by one.

Jacinth looked at her husband haughtily. "You need not insult me, if Mr. Seymour was my friend," she said; "and I trust you are not going to be the vulgar instigator of a street row. After all, Mr. Seymour is a journalist, and it is natural he should try to do all he can for his paper; it's only human nature."

"Jacinth!" exclaimed the Duchess, angrily. "You cannot think, for one moment, of what you are saying. You should be the last woman in the world to speak like that. Had my husband been insulted and betrayed as yours has been, I should have shot the man myself, had I had the chance; and yet you are actually defending a man who has behaved like this Mr. Seymour has, and instead of counselling your husband to thrash him within an inch of his life, you talk about a street row, and Mr. Seymour's love for journalism."

I always thought journalism vulgar. I did not think dishonesty and unprincipled conduct were synonymous with the Press." And the Duchess rose from her seat and went towards the door, as if the same room could not hold herself and her daughter-in-law.

Lord William good-naturedly tried to cover Jacinth's slip. He could not help feeling seriously sorry for his wife. He knew too well how dreadful a thing it is to be disappointed in one's oldest friends to be as severe as his mother was, and he said : "Never mind, mother ; let us, at all events, have breakfast. Seymour is not a pigmy, and I must not proceed on my errand of vengeance in a state of starvation. Just look at the time, too ! We shall have the house full of sympathisers directly people are up ; and here's ten o'clock already and nothing done. After all, the *Wasp* is the thing to be pitied. Just imagine what will be Seymour's feelings once he knows how egregiously he has been hoaxed. I question much if he is even worth thrashing."



“Indeed he is not,” said Jacinth, eagerly. “Leave him alone, William; he is not the man to take a thrashing calmly, I can tell you, and he might half kill you. He is sure to expect you will come to the office, and he’ll be prepared for you. The whole thing will resolve itself into a vulgar street fight. Take any other steps you wish; but, were I you, I should leave matters alone, and let it die a natural death. What harm will it do, after all; especially now, when Thursday is so near, and everyone will hear for themselves what your scheme really is?” And Jacinth came close to her husband and put her hand timidly on his arm.

The Duchess looked at her indignantly, and, without another word, she went into the dining-room, followed in a few seconds by the Duke and his wife, who sat down quietly and began their breakfast as if the *Wasp* had never put forth its sting. At last the Duchess said: “That woman is at the bottom of all this!”

“Do you mean Jacinth?” asked the Duke,

with the greatest surprise depicted on his countenance. "For heaven's sake, mother, take care what you say! William adores her, and would never forgive you if he heard such a speech from your lips."

"He will have to hear it from a good many people's lips before the day's out," said the Duchess, emphatically. "My dear boy, I saw it in her face. She is in a nervous state of abject terror, and I know she is at the bottom of the whole business. I only wish she may be able to keep her secret from her husband. It would almost kill him were he to find her out; and how he is to avoid doing that, I cannot see."

"It would ruin his whole career," said the Duke. "Mother, if there be any truth in your suspicion, we must hush up the whole thing. Not only would it, as you say, kill William, but the scandal in the family would be so dreadful; and now, when he has sown all his wild oats, and we can be proud of him, and all the plans he is maturing, it seems too hard for him to be troubled by this; but it

cannot be true. She loves him. She is as proud as Lucifer. She could not do such a deed. Think what it would mean, mother. A woman who would steal from her husband, who would try to ruin his career for a mere friend ; why, she would be neither more nor less than a fiend !”

“You forget her father, and her probable bringing up,” said the Duchess quietly ; “but hush ! here they come. Let us bide our time, and see what the day brings forth, and what are Mr. Florance’s counsels, then we can take our own course in the matter ;” and when Lord and Lady William entered the room and took their places, conversation became a little more general, and for an hour or two there was no more mention of the *Wasp* ; though before long the house was besieged with callers, who, one and all, took the view that the so-called bill was nothing more nor less than a badly executed joke, and a piece of bad taste on the part of the editor ; a view Lord William could have been only too glad to take himself, and which he did

not say he did not embrace until he was left alone for a few moments with his brother, when he said: "That is the view to take to the public, Dorset, there's no doubt of that; but we must find out how the secret has leaked out. You see it was my bill, word for word, and the fellow who has let out this may do incalculable mischief another time. If it weren't for that I'd let the whole thing slide, more especially as this will cure Jacinth of her one-time affection for that miserable rag, with which I wish to goodness she had never had anything to do. It is a terrible worry, anyhow, particularly now, when I wanted to concentrate all my energies on my speech for Thursday. I must thrash the fellow. I shall pay off several old scores at once."

"I will go and see what Florance suggests," said the Duke. "Don't thrash Seymour until after that; you may depend upon it he has taken the opportunity of leaving town for the day. You send round notes to the evening papers; or, rather, go round yourself and get them to state that the text of the bill

appearing in to-day's *Wasp* is an impudent forgery, and then we'll meet at Florance's office. But take one piece of advice from me, William," he added, laying his hand gently on his brother's shoulder, "send Jacinth back to Windyholme quickly;" and, without giving Lord William time to reply, the Duke went out of the room, and was soon on his way to the lawyer's office; while Lord William thought for one moment over what he could probably have meant about Jacinth, but came to no conclusion on the subject before the striking of the clock warned him that, if he intended the contradiction of the *Wasp's* statement to appear at once, he must lose no time in going round to the newspaper offices.

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## CHAPTER III.

AT THE OFFICE OF THE "WASP."

“IN the multitude of counsellors is wisdom,” says the proverb, but I question much if this has ever been found to be true. Certainly, in the case at present under discussion there was little or no help to be found from the counsel of all those who streamed into the Duke’s library on that eventful Tuesday morning and afternoon, and one and all gave different advice on the subject until both the Duke and Lord William felt that if they heard any more of the plans submitted to them they should go wild; and so, finally, if reluctantly, came to the conclusion that Mr. Florance’s advice was the best, the while Lord William felt strangely disappointed at being deprived of the vengeance that he was literally longing to take.

"You see, your Grace," the lawyer had said, as calmly and quietly as became a man of law, "it is very necessary, at least, in my eyes, that Lord William's name should not, especially at this juncture, be connected with anything so extremely revolutionary as this special bill; as I judge from what you tell me, the measure to be brought before the House on Thursday has your Grace's approbation, and therefore is very different from this. Under these circumstances, his Lordship should content himself with a mere statement in the evening papers to the effect that the bill with which his name is connected, and the one published in this scurrulous journal, have nothing in common. The idea that this is a burlesque and an impudent and very ill-judged jest will gain ground, and the editor will find himself shunned and his paper properly ignored. He may have raised his circulation for a week or two, at the most; but when people see your statement to-night, and then hear nothing more, the *Wasp* will suffer, for no one will believe in a paper like

this any more, so the whole thing will collapse."

"You see, Mr. Florance," said the Duke, uneasily, "there has been a tremendous breach of confidence somewhere, and as a protection for the future I think we should discover the culprit."

"Anyone who would be in a position to be dangerous now, could not have been so foolish as to purvey this bill to the *Wasp*, instead of the real one," said the lawyer. "However, if your Grace would be happier to have some ideas on the subject, let me advise you to see the head of the printing-office. Should anyone have been discharged from there lately, and be in poor circumstances in consequence, I agree with you that there might be strong grounds for suspicion; but, even then, I see no good in hunting the man down. He will catch it hot enough from the editor, without our interfering; forgive me such an expression, your Grace. Really the one person to be pitied is Mr. Seymour. He must have paid handsomely for this, and



what his feelings will be to-night I, for one, cannot imagine."

"I think I had better see the head of the printing-office," said the Duke, hesitatingly. "I think he should be warned—should be told all about it."

"I have no doubt he knows already, and is in much agitation," said Mr. Florance. "But again let me urge on your Grace to do nothing to connect Lord William with this first bill; if you do, I fear you may alienate some of your warmest supporters, and I understand that the passing of the real proposals is a foregone conclusion?"

The Duke hardly replied to Mr. Florance's last question, and, rising, he remarked, "After all, Mr. Florance, I will think over the matter before even seeing anyone else. I agree with you that it is absolutely imperative that his lordship's name should not be in any way connected with the *Wasp* publication. Perhaps you could make it convenient to come and see me after dinner this evening, before I go out?" and so saying the Duke returned home,

to spend his day listening to the wildest suggestions from all his friends, until both he and Lord William felt that Mr. Florance's advice was the best, and that it would be better to leave matters alone, even to the flogging of Mr. Seymour, whose punishment would, no doubt, be ample, when he learned how very far off he was from the object of his desires. For the more they listened to comments on the bill itself, the more convinced they were that it was absolutely necessary to prevent their supporters from thinking that Lord William had ever seriously contemplated the passing of measures that were as revolutionary as they were ridiculous ; while even the Dowager Duchess, at last, saw matters in the same aspect ; ceased to demand the extermination and corporal punishment of Mr. Seymour ; and, finally, even begged Lord William to come for a short drive in the Park with her and Jacinth, to show all the world that the *Wasp's* communication to the public had not affected him in the very least.

But Jacinth had naturally spent such a terrible day of suspense and anguish, that she was not in a condition to drive; and as her morning had been pleasantly engaged in listening to Issy, who had even braved the idea of meeting one of the Duchesses who had ignored her existence, and, in consequence, had incurred her bitterest hatred, and who had rushed on at once to see her sister, and give her the benefit of some of the pleasant reminiscences of what she had always said and thought of Francis Seymour's intimacy with Jacinth, which were one of her strongest points. And by the time she had repeated all that she had ever remembered on the subject, she had talked Jacinth into a violent headache, so violent, and so real, that the Duchess could not help seeing she was actually ill, and not pretending to be so to avoid hearing any more about the *Wasp's* article. And she graciously pulled down the blinds of Jacinth's sitting-room, and suggested sleep on the sofa, while she bore off her son triumphantly, pitying Jacinth for her fearful

sister, as much as she did Lord William for his connection with the family; while Jacinth lay trembling in her room, dying with anxiety to hear the result of the consultation with the lawyer, and wishing most profoundly that she could have had five minutes alone with her husband; albeit she could not help shivering whenever she saw him look at her kindly, or felt the touch of his loving hand.

The moment she had discovered the bill was a spent shot, she had felt a curious amount of mingled relief and dread. Relief, because her selfish hand had not, after all, harmed her husband or the measure on which so much depended; and dread, because of what Mr. Seymour might do or say in his rage, when he discovered how egregiously he was taken in. He would most naturally imagine she had done it on purpose, and she could not help wondering what would be her fate, if she were called on to give back the money, which, unfortunately for her, no longer stood to her credit in the Barford Bank, or which she would have most undoubtedly restored at

once to Mr. Seymour, leaving him to believe that she had intentionally given him the wrong paper, and that she never for one moment meant to injure her husband.

She seemed to remember she had heard of prosecutions for obtaining money under false pretences. Could such a fate be hers? She remembered how she had dreaded the idea of her husband disputing some of the items of her accounts. What would become of her were she to hear her crime discussed by lawyers in open court? Rather than that, rather than run such a risk, she would end all by taking poison.

Her father's fate occurred to her: she remembered it all so well; the nameless horror of the suicide, the ghastly, awful feeling in the house, the fearful shock, the disgrace, her rage and anger at her father's deed. Yet here she was placed almost in an identical situation, in one that would, she felt sure, force her to kill herself. There would be no help for it, should people, should her husband ever learn what she really was.

All at once, in a moment she realized what she was; the mass of selfishness, the butterfly, without one thought or hope of a better existence. She sat up from the sofa and pushed her hair back from her face; she grew stone cold, then fearfully hot, as she remembered her brother's teaching, and the idea that beyond the wicked, cowardly act waited the Day of Judgment, with its absolute publicity, when the secrets of all hearts shall be open.

Jacynth naturally had no belief in the old doctrine of a hell of sulphur and trying flames, of the orthodox devil armed with a trident, and decorated with horns and a long tail; but as she sat trembling at the thoughts and dreads which crowded her brain, she was so abjectly frightened by the idea of what might be read out of her at the last day, that she threw herself on her knees by the side of the sofa, and for the first time for many a long day poured out wild incoherent prayers to God to deliver her at once, instantly, from the state in which she was.

The idea that the rest of the people on the Judgment Day would be so much occupied with the reading of their own record as to have small desire to trouble themselves about anyone else, never occurred to her. As she knelt she seemed to see the placid, common, kind faces of the respectable Barford people she had refused to know and had spurned, as being too inferior for her to associate with ; she remembered her bitter speeches about their first calls on her, and the insolent manner in which she had repulsed their timid advances ; and as she thought over the many people she had spurned because they were not good enough for her to know, she recollected how they would all feel they had been spared her acquaintance, and rejoice accordingly when they saw in the papers what she had done ; or heard it read out at that awful day, the nearness, the absolute certainty of which had never appealed to her before, had never seemed for one moment to be a possibility.

Jacinth remained on her knees, her head buried in her hands, pondering deeply. She

tried to disbelieve in all she had been taught ; she assured herself, over and over again, that the idea of such a judgment was ludicrous and only meant to keep the lower classes in order ; that in these days no one believed in such old women's stories ; but it was no use, she could not get the faces of her accusers out of her mind ; she could not avoid seeing one Face, bent on her alone, which she had never thought of since the nursery days, when the picture Bible used to be a mystic source of dread and delight, kept solely for wet Sunday afternoons, when playthings were forbidden, and there was nothing passing in the streets at which the children could look and be amused.

Even as she knelt there she could not help her own old-fashioned reverence for sacred things re-arising, and causing her yet more suffering, and a long passed scene of her childhood returned to her vividly.

She remembered Issy's calm common-sense manner of looking at life, and her well-kept resolves to be good, because goodness meant



prosperity and comfort and success. She recollected how she had rebelled at such ideas, and had proceeded to violently demonstrate the beauty of virtue being its own reward, and that one should be good because of pleasing God, in such an overwhelming manner, that the governess, alarmed by her violence, came to the rescue, and sent her to bed for making Issy cry, without troubling herself in the least to investigate the causes of the disturbance.

Jacinth's misery increased as she recollected those dear old nursery and schoolroom days, when she had had hopes and ambitions, and when her worst sins were torn skirts and handkerchiefs spoiled by using them as dusters ; and she was almost inclined to pray for a return of the days when she was irresponsible for her actions, and was simply punished and then began again, when she remembered that the small sufferings then, which looked so unimportant to look back upon, were really as great in proportion as those she was at present enduring. True, when the punishment was over, she could

begin again. Was there any punishment, any atonement, other than that one of public disgrace, which she could make, and so earn a right once more to start free from sin, and live a new life with the husband she had given herself to? She could see none, absolutely none, except confession and restitution. Confession to her husband, which would mean forfeiture of every morsel of his love and esteem; and restitution of that which had passed absolutely out of her own control.

Jacinth knelt on, praying a little incoherently, pondering as incoherently on what she could do. At last she looked at the clock; it was not late, but late enough for her to remember she would have to face the family at dinner, or cause them to suspect there was more at the bottom of her headache than Issy's visit, and the shock of discovering the treachery of an old friend.

She rose and looked at herself in the glass; her eyes were swollen with crying, her hair disordered, and her face appeared years older than it had done the week before; her maid's

scrutiny would have to be faced. She bathed her eyes, arranged her hair, and tried to cease thinking. She looked out of the window across the wilderness of flowers, the stocks, and mignonette, and daisies with which the boxes were full, and saw the children in the opposite house at their nursery window. All at once she wished she had had a child; in its little arms she would have found safety, in its care she would have become good. As it was, she had nothing, nothing to live for, and she was almost in tears again, when a low knock came at her door, and the voice of her maid asked if she could speak to her for a moment. Jacinth cast a hasty glance at her face again, and then turned the key in the lock. "I have a bad headache, Parsons, and did not want to be disturbed until dinner time," she said.

"And neither would I have troubled your Ladyship," said the maid, respectfully, "but I heard you moving, and there is a poor woman down stairs in the deepest distress. She says she must see your ladyship on a matter of

life and death. She's quite respectable, even though she is crying dreadful, and if your Ladyship isn't too tired, perhaps you'll see her. I think she is a Barford person ; she spoke as if she knew Mr. Merridew."

Jacinth wondered if some impecunious dressmaker was coming to worry for an unpaid account, and was provided with tears to prove that unless the bill was paid she would be turned out of house and home. At any rate, this was always a possibility, and she was too much afraid of anything just now to run any risks, and after a moment's pause she said, "I think you had better let her come up, Parsons ; a matter of life and death is too serious a matter to trifle with. I suppose she is respectable, really."

"Oh! yes, my Lady," answered Parsons, who was consumed with anxiety to know what was the cause of the woman's tears ; "and, anyhow, I'll remain in the bedroom within call," and, so saying, Mrs. Parsons went down stairs, and soon returned with a respectable looking woman in evident deep grief, whom she

announced as "the person, my Lady," taking herself off ostentatiously into the bedroom and as ostentatiously leaving the door a little way open, as if to inspire Lady William with an idea of her protecting presence.

But the woman disappointed her, for looking at the door she said, apprehensively, "If I could see you quite alone, my Lady."

Lady William rose, closed the door, and bolted it. The look of the woman was so respectable, so grief stricken, that she could not avoid believing that she was quite safe with her. Then she said, "You should have sent up your name and business, my good woman; I make a point of never seeing anyone except I know their business, and only received you because my maid vouched for your respectability, and the depth of your distress. I think, too, she said you were from Barford, and knew Mr. Merridew," and Jacinth seated herself and looked impatiently for her to speak, for she could see she was no impecunious dun, and was rather angry with herself for imagining that anyone would

dare to come to her in the Duchess's house on such a subject as an unpaid bill.

"I don't know how to begin my story," the woman said, after a moment, "but my father's name is Crumpler, and 'tis he knows Mr. Merridew; but I only told the lady there this because I thought you'd see me quicker. It's nothing to do with Barford. It's Mr. Seymour bid me come here, my Lady, and unless you'll listen to me I'm lost."

Jacynth rose indignantly, and flushing deeply, she said: "Mr. Seymour sent you here! He never dared do such a thing."

"Oh, my Lady," said the woman, "don't be angry. I know all about the paper, and how wicked they've been to his Lordship, and I don't wonder you're vexed to hear the name; but Barnes and me are in sore distress. Barnes, he's my husband, my Lady, and Mr. Feltham has been to him and threatens to prosecute him; and Mr. Seymour, he says, my Lady, that you've got a feeling heart, and if you'd go with him to the office he'd give us a writing to say as how Barnes didn't give

him the paper, and then we should be saved;" and the unfortunate creature fell on the ground at Lady William's feet, and held her dress with all the strength of despair.

Jacinth put her hands to her head. She could not understand a word of what the woman meant. Who Mr. Feltham was, and why she should go to the office, passed her comprehension. At last she said, as quietly as she could: "Mrs. Barnes, unless you get up from the floor and tell me what you want me to do, and, if possible, without mentioning Mr. Seymour's name, I cannot possibly help you. Who is Mr. Feltham, and why should he accuse your husband of giving Mr. Seymour a paper which never existed, and which Mr. Seymour wrote himself, as far as I can understand?"

"So folks are to think," said Mrs. Barnes, rising reluctantly, but sensibly becoming calmer now she saw Jacinth would listen to her. "Yet, my Lady, that bill was printed for Lord William under Mr. Feltham's orders in his works. He does all the Government

printing, my Lady, and the moment that paper came out this morning, round Mr. Feltham came to Barnes in an awful way."

"Why did he select your husband?" asked Jacinth. "Surely he has more than one man in his employ?"

"My husband left him a fortnight ago to better himself," said Mrs. Barnes, beginning to weep again, "and he was mad at losing such a good hand. Besides, Barnes was the man who knew most of that particular bill; then he, being out of the office, and having nothing to lose, made it suspicious; and, my Lady, Barnes having more pay in his new place, we've paid up some old scores, and that's suspicious, Mr. Feltham says; and Barnes, he says, rather than be thought a thief, or called one, to shame me and the children, he'll take a rope and hang himself; and he's that violent and desponding, my Lady, he'll do it, unless his name is cleared."

"I suppose he is the only person who can do that," said Jacinth; "though, Mrs. Barnes, I can't see why you should come to me."



"For this reason, my Lady: I went round to Mr. Seymour at once after Mr. Feltham had left, and I'd calmed Barnes a bit, and sent him off to work, him swearing all the while the moment the warrant was out, and Mr. Feltham threatened him with that, he'd do away with himself," said Mrs. Barnes, gulping her sobs down, "and when I saw him he laughed, until I asked him if he were hoping to have a man's death on his mind. This made him stop laughing, my Lady, and listen, and he saw from my manner that Barnes meant what he said, and then he suggested I should come to see you, my Lady, for if you'll make Lord William forgive him, more because he's got the wrong bill, and has paid heavy for that, says he, he'll tell Mr. Feltham he never saw Barnes in his life, though he has got a long envelope addressed to the office in Barnes's writing he showed me, and he says he'll produce that straight out if you will not beg him off; and, my Lady, if you don't he'll die, and then we shall all die too. See, my Lady, I have brought you

a bit of a note. Do read it, my Lady," and Mrs. Barnes, shivering and shaking with dread, held out one of the well-known square envelopes, stamped with the *Wasp*, and addressed in Mr. Seymour's writing.

"I cannot possibly go to such a place," said Lady William, glancing at the note and refusing to take it. "I can never see Mr. Seymour again; my husband would never forgive me if I did."

"And mine will die if you don't," exclaimed Mrs. Barnes, frantically. "You don't know Barnes, my Lady, or you'd know my words are true. He's a soul above his place; he writes, my Lady, and that's how Mr. Seymour's got his envelope; and many's the hour he spends at home, composing beautifully, to make a name to hand down to posterity; he'll never live to hand down one of shame; and unless you beg him off, and ask his Lordship not to prosecute, he'll never see another dawn."

"I can do that, without going down to the office," said Lady William.

"Oh! my Lady, read that note first," entreated Mrs. Barnes. "Mr. Seymour said he must see you, or he'd take no steps in the matter. Do read the note;" and urged by Mrs. Barnes, Jacinth opened the note, which contained these words only: "Come to the office alone, at once, and tell me the enemies' tactics, or I shall not be able to exonerate Barnes, and the man is such a vain fool, he is very likely to keep his word. Come to the small door in Vere Street; I shall be there until 7.30."

"This says nothing, except that Mr. Seymour wishes to see me," said Lady William. "It is too ridiculous to think for one moment I should go."

"Nothing else can save my husband," said Mrs. Barnes, wringing her hands. "Don't you think I saw the foolishness of it all, my Lady, and thought you'd say this, and I told Mr. Seymour so, too? but he just laughed, and said you were too old a friend to refuse him. And until he knew positively from you how Lord William took matters, he couldn't

promise aught. 'After all, Barnes might be a necessary sacrifice,' he said, my Lady; and him the father of eight, and a genius, too, my Lady. Oh! do; do help us. You may want help some day yourself, my Lady. Forgive me for saying such a thing; but, anyhow, at the last day you'll be glad you were brave, and went to the office and saved my husband;" and she looked appealingly at Jacinth, and stretched out her hands to her entreatingly.

The last day! Jacinth's state of nervous depression caused her to regard Mrs. Barnes's words with superstitious awe. What had made the woman mention the last day? Fate must intend her to go with her. Perhaps the humiliation of begging Mr. Seymour to exonerate Barnes was to be her punishment. After that she would be forgiven, and be able to live a quiet life again at Windyholme. For the first time in her life, Windyholme appeared to her in the light of a peaceful haven of refuge—somewhere where she was absolutely safe and happy; and Jacinth was losing herself in one of her endless reveries again, when

an impatient sob caught her ear, and she remembered she was not alone. "I cannot think what I had better do," she said, hesitatingly.

"My Lady, if I can't show Barnes that his character is clear, this very night," said Mrs. Barnes, eagerly, twisting her thin hands together nervously, and gazing apprehensively at Lady William, "he'll never live to see to-morrow's dawn. He's that high-spirited and haughty, and so anxious to make a name for himself, suspicion tries him more than most, my Lady. As a boy he never could bear it; and now all this'll be the death of him. Oh! my Lady," she added, once more throwing herself on her knees, and clasping Lady William's dress, "Don't think any more; come to the office, and get Mr. Seymour to write a line. Even now Barnes may be a dead man. I mustn't let him go home and not find me; and he's back at eight always for his tea, and it's going on for seven now.

Lady William glanced apprehensively at

the clock. If she were to go to the office, she must indeed go at once. Dinner was at eight, and she must be back to dress. The drive would not be long; but, of course, there was no knowing how long Francis Seymour would keep her. No; the risk was too great, she would not go; she would write a note.

She said this to Mrs. Barnes, who at once burst into a wailing cry: "It's his death blow, my Lady, his death blow; Mr. Seymour said he wouldn't even see me again, and that no one but your Ladyship herself would alter his determination. As you won't come, my Lady, I'll go, but when you take up your paper to-morrow and see Barnes's fate in it, you'll know you have yourself to blame for making me a widow, and all the children fatherless," and Mrs. Barnes, her thin shoulders shaking with sobs, rose to her feet, and was going to the door, when Jacinth said, impulsively: "No; don't go, Mrs. Barnes. If matters are as bad as you say, we had better set off at once. Your husband must be a singularly weak and wicked man, and for aught I know

may have betrayed his master's trust, but after Mr. Seymour's note I must see this for myself. I could not have anyone's death on my conscience ;" and remembering bitterly that if Mr. Barnes fulfilled his threat, that she would most certainly be the only person responsible for it, Jacinth called in her maid, whose ear had been glued to the door in the vain hope of hearing what Mrs. Barnes required, and bidding her dress her quickly, gave her a message to deliver to Lord William should he return home before her business was finished; then calling to Mrs. Barnes to follow her she ran down stairs quickly, passing the hall porter so swiftly, that when after events justified it, he gave vent to the remarkable prophecy that he could have told "from her ladyship's manner that something was hup."

The drive to the office was too short for Jacinth to have very much time for meditation ; Vere Street was reached in less than ten minutes, and, leaving Mrs. Barnes in the hansom, she hurriedly ascended the somewhat

rickety flight of stairs that led into the anything but palatial room in which Mr. Seymour was in the habit of interviewing would-be contributors and of making up the paper for the week.

He was seated at the broad desk, covered with books and pamphlets, and with the usual big wicker baskets for correspondence, proofs, etc., which occupied the centre of the room, and was writing hard ; but when he lifted his head to answer Jacinth's knock and saw who his visitor was, he threw down his pen, and, pushing back his chair, came eagerly towards her.

“ Then you didn't do it intentionally ? ” he asked, brightly. “ Here I have been all day in an awful state of mind. Awful ; not so much because I have made an egregious ass of myself and of my paper—though, heaven knows, that is odious enough—but because I was fool enough to believe that you, my dear old friend, had been the hand to strike me down. Of course, the whole thing means ruination for me. The proprietors have been



here and have closed our connection; and, in consequence, off I go, heaven only knows where! but, now I see you were as much sold as I was, I am comparatively happy, for you'd never have come here if you had sold me into the hands of the Philistines. It's a bad job all round; but, at all events, I've annoyed all your husband's people, and given the bill a serious shake, and I have still hopes of saving myself and the paper by another edition to-morrow, stating the real facts of the case."

"What do you mean?" asked Jacinth, in a state of horror. "You can't be going to tell how you got the bill?"

"Not I," answered Mr. Seymour, placing her a chair and sitting down himself once more. "Is it likely that I should betray you? But don't you, can't you, see what the silence means? The bill you gave me was the original one—the first wild imaginings of Lord William's Radical brain. Now he has sobered down, become more rational and more under his brother's influence, and,

perhaps, under yours too, he is far too anxious lest people should hear of his connection with number one, to do aught save contradict his present share in the lovely document. Of course, you've seen the evening papers?" and Mr. Seymour passed her a copy of the *St. James's Gazette*. "It's masterly, isn't it?" he asked, as he watched Jacinth's countenance as she hurriedly scanned the few words in which her husband disclaimed any responsibility for the *Wasp's* edition of his bill. "You see he says nothing about our copy itself, but only promises the public that Thursday night will show what his proposals really are. But, masterly as it is, I mean to smash it to-morrow in a special, and shall challenge him to deny that, mad and revolutionary as the proposals are, they were once his; and, what is more, were the desire of his heart. Few people will believe that the hand who could have penned these proposals is the same one that wrote number two, and which is ambitious of steering the bark of England into port; and such a port! The

whole thing sickens me ; but I think I shall finally dispose of him here," and he hastily turned over the pages of the MSS. on which he had been engaged when Lady William entered the office.

"But I did not come here for this," said Lady William, anxiously. "Indeed, Mr. Seymour, I would much rather hear no more about the matter. I wish my hand had been cut off before I handed you that paper. Heaven only knows what I have suffered since. You told that poor Mrs. Barnes you would not exonerate her husband until you had seen me. It was cruel of you to bring me here, when a few words on a scrap of paper would have done. It is still more cruel to keep me here, when, at any moment, I may be discovered. Let me have a few lines for Barnes and let me go. You can tell me all you have to say some other day."

"And what other day do you think will dawn for me?" asked Mr. Seymour, bitterly. "No, Lady William, this is my only chance of ever seeing you again, and I mean to

make the most of it. Great God! can't you imagine what this day has been to me ever since it began, with Feltham and the proprietors bursting in on me with the pleasing intelligence that we had all been sold, with Feltham, in addition, swearing he would have either the name of the traitor or my blood? I declined, naturally, to part with either, and then the proprietors, who had some inkling of how I got my information, began about you, and how I must have been a conceited ass and a fool, and all the rest of it, to think for one moment that I could wheedle any woman into giving up the real article. Of course, your name wasn't mentioned, but I saw what they meant, and when I had a moment to myself and began to realise what this *fiasco* might possibly mean, I felt I should go right straight out of my mind; but I ought not to have doubted you for one moment. I ought to have known you, at least, would be true to me." And Mr. Seymour rose from his seat and walked hurriedly up and down the room.

At last Jacinth said : " I can't, I really can't, stay here one moment longer, or I shall never get back in time for dinner ; and then poor Mrs. Barnes is in the cab waiting. Do, pray, let me have a few lines for her, Mr. Seymour, and let me go. You can write all you have to say to me, but I must go home now. You cannot wish to harm me ; and, if Lord William had the smallest idea of my whereabouts, he would turn me out of doors ; he was so dreadfully angry this morning, and so sorry, too, for me, that I dare not think of what would be the consequence if he discovered I had been here. Let me have the note, and then let me say good-bye." And Jacinth rose from her chair and held out her hand for the note which she hoped to find was ready for her *protégée*.

Mr. Seymour turned white to the lips ; he continued his hurried walk, and for a few moments did not speak ; at last he sat down to his desk, wrote a few lines hurriedly, and then whistled down the pipe into the lower office. When he was answered, he put the

note in the tube, and then turning to Jacinth, he said : " That will exonerate Barnes, dear Lady William. Don't think of him any more ; now listen to me. Intentionally or not intentionally—I know that it was unintentionally—you have done the paper a great deal of harm ; only you can remedy this harm, and therefore I think you cannot be very angry with me if I keep you here a quarter of an hour longer, to tell you what I want you to do. You have plenty of time," he added, as he saw her glance apprehensively at the office clock. " You used to be able to dress in ten minutes ; ten minutes more will take you home : it is just twenty-five minutes past seven ; you shall go, I promise you, at twenty minutes to eight, but until then I must beg you to listen to me. You may think we shall meet again ; I know quite well we never shall, it is impossible. I shall not dare to write, and, if I did, you would not dare to reply. I cannot part with my dear old friend, my sweetheart of those blessed days of long ago, so lightly, even if you could not assist

me now. You owe me something, Lady William?"

"A thousand pounds," interrupted Jacinth, bitterly; "you need not remind me of my debt, Mr. Seymour; were I to die now, I think that sum would be engraved on my heart in letters of blood."

Mr. Seymour jumped up. "You could not believe I meant to refer to the money; I am not such an infernal cad!" he exclaimed. "Perish the money and every single thing connected with it! I meant you were my debtor as far as regarded information only, but I won't even say that, if it hurts you."

"What do you want?" asked Jacinth, wearily, pressing her aching head with her hands, and longing miserably for the cool silence of the hall at Windyholme.

"I want you to look over these sheets of manuscript, and tell me if these ideas are anything like Lord William's own," replied Mr. Seymour, gathering up the sheets of paper which strewed his desk and arranging them hurriedly. "If I can in any measure

indicate any of the real clauses of the bill, if I can produce any of Lord William's new sentiments in my special, and state on authority (naturally one wouldn't say on whose) that the sentiments of to-day are indeed different to those of a couple of years ago, I should yet save myself and my paper, and yet should not injure you in the very least. You have been a couple of days at the Duchess's, and you must have some idea of what Thursday's speech will be like. Do, please, look over these papers; you can read very quickly, and tell me if I am anywhere near the right line?" and so saying, Mr. Seymour gave Lady William the papers and waited for her to speak.

"I can't see them here, the office is so dark," she said, taking them very reluctantly, and just glancing over Mr. Seymour's clearly written sheets of copy; "let me take them home and report on them."

"That would be foolish indeed," remarked Mr. Seymour, going to the windows and pulling up the blinds as high as they would.



go, then throwing up the grimy casements, he added, "Even on a May evening it's dark here soon after seven, thanks to the dirt and the narrow street; but you can see quite plainly here. Don't be afraid of being seen; no one ever comes up Vere Street after three, and most certainly no one will come here now; our office closes usually at six, and it is much too late to expect anyone."

Jacinth rose from her seat and came close to the open window. She glanced apprehensively into the street; not a soul was there, and any inhabitants of the opposite side who might endeavour to look out through their grimy and often enough cracked windows would certainly not recognise her. Mr. Seymour brought her the tall office-stool, and she sat down, looking quickly through the mass of papers without speaking. She was too miserable, felt too absolutely lost and hopeless, to throw them down and insist on leaving the office. The thousand pounds seemed to lie red hot between her and any means of escape, and she felt helpless, and

broken spirited, and broken hearted. It would have taken an hour or two to really read and understand Mr. Seymour's article; but Jacinth saw enough to comprehend that he had obtained a very shrewd guess at what were, as far as she had judged from what she heard at the Duchess's, the real provisions of the bill, and that Mr. Seymour had farther discovered the truth about the first bill. She turned the papers over and over, reading here one sentence, and there another; at last she said: "I know no more about Lord William's bill than I did at Windyholme, and I cannot turn traitor again;" then, rising to her feet with a great effort, she added: "I must go, Mr. Seymour; I will go. My husband would never forgive this interview now. I pray he may never learn how I sold him and my honour for £1,000!" and throwing down the papers, she was about to rush from the room, when Mr. Seymour caught her hand. What he was going to do or say will never be known, for at that moment the door burst open wide, and the Duke of Dorset stood on the

threshold, gazing at Jacinth, who, with a wild shriek of fright, rushed to the door and attempted to pass him ; but he held her tightly by her wrists, and looking steadfastly at her agonised face, he said, contemptuously, " So my mother was right, after all ; but even she did not suspect you of being as foul a thing as you are ;" and throwing her from him angrily, he turned on his heel, locked the office door on them, and rushed home as fast as he could, intending to bring his brother back to Vere Street to deal as he wished with his guilty wife and the man to whom he could not help believing she had already given up all that a woman holds most dear.

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## CHAPTER IV.

## INTO OUTER DARKNESS.

FOR a few horrible moments Lady William and Mr. Seymour stood gazing at each other, in awful overwhelming terror. Then Jacinth rushed once more to the door, and shook it violently ; but it was firmly locked, and there was no means of escape there. She looked at Mr. Seymour, but he was hastily rummaging in his desk ; then, having evidently found the object of his search, he said : “ There is another way out—my private staircase ; come at once. If he catches us now here together, there will be no help for us ; we shall be trapped like rats in a cage. We have not time to think now ; all we can do is to fly for our lives ; ” and, so saying, he caught Jacinth’s hand, opened another door on the left, and in less than five minutes they found

themselves in a narrow passage-way behind Vere Street, walking rapidly along, whither they, neither of them, for the moment knew.

At last, after what appeared to Jacinth to be half a lifetime, Mr. Seymour hailed a passing cab, and put her in, getting in himself. "There's no help for it," he said. "Fate has been too strong for us. We shall just catch the tidal train, and, at all events, we will not stop until the Channel is between us and Lord William; then we will make our plans. It's no good attempting to explain the situation; beside that, I don't know what we should say, if we tried to. We must make the best of a bad job; after all, there will be every chance of happiness, once we are away from this cursed spot."

Jacinth had not yet uttered one word, and as the hansom tore along towards Charing Cross, she felt less and less able to do so. She had not realized, in the least, what such a flight must—could only mean. Like Mr. Seymour, she only longed to put distance between her and her husband. And as she

cowered in the corner of the cab, her hands clasped, and her heart beating violently, her one idea was flight, flight anywhere, and at any cost, if only she could for ever be beyond the reach of the man she had injured—beyond the reach of the withering scorn of his people and of the world which was so hard, so very hard, to her.

At any slight obstacle that came in their way, at any trifling delay in their progress, she shrank and quivered with positive physical pain. Mr. Seymour's continual glancing at his watch nearly drove her wild; and when the hansom dashed up into Charing Cross Station, with about five minutes to spare for ticket-taking and place-finding, Jacinth got out, exactly as if she were in a dream, from which she did not rouse herself in the least until she found herself in the corner of a first-class carriage, tearing along rapidly through the sweet May night, in company with Mr. Seymour and a young couple—the young couple would, perhaps, be the proper way of designating them; and a girl of about sixteen, evidently going

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to Paris with her maid to school. For Jacinth had noted, though scarcely consciously at the time, how she was seen off by her father and mother, with many encouraging words and sundry promises, and how the child was evidently divided in her mind between the natural dread of school, and the as natural delight of seeing a strange country, and taking a long journey for the first time. Indeed, Jacinth would hardly, perhaps, have noticed as much as this, had not the lady asked her very politely if she would have the very great kindness to allow her husband to see that the maid took her daughter on the right boat, as neither of them had travelled very much, and though the maid was French, was an indifferent traveller ; and as Jacinth assented, she wondered drearily to herself what the good lady would have thought could she have had the smallest idea of how the case really stood ; that she, Jacinth Petersfield—Lady William Petersfield—was flying from the just wrath of her husband, with another man to take care of her.

But, even then, she was too drearily miserable, too absolutely stunned, to realize how such a journey must end, or what construction the world would put upon it. And it was only when they reached Paris, in the early morning, and were driving through the lovely streets, that she understood that the time for action had come, and that it was absolutely necessary for her to settle what she meant to do, and where she was to part company with Mr. Seymour. Though how she was to do this, or what course she must take, she could not determine ; more especially as the thought struck her that, except for her purse, which might at the very outside contain ten shillings, she was absolutely penniless, and as absolutely without means of obtaining money, as naturally her cheque-book was at home at Windyholme ; and though she could have obtained another in a few days, she would, of course, hesitate long before giving an address to anyone who would communicate the information to those from whom she was most anxious to conceal it.



When the cab drove up to the small hotel, whither Mr. Seymour had directed it, Jacinth had determined that as soon as she reached the comparative shelter of the sitting-room, she would at once ask Mr. Seymour's advice as to her future, and talk the matter out as far as she could ; but, naturally, at that hour the question of a sitting-room was not mooted. Coffee and rolls were ordered, and Jacinth found herself alone in one of the usual French rooms—half sitting, half bed room—while Mr. Seymour went downstairs to see after the school-girl and her maid, who were located at the same hotel, until the day was old enough to allow of them being driven out to the school, which was in one of the suburbs of the great city.

Jacinth locked the door and sank down into the wide arm-chair by the window, gazing down into the narrow street, where already the shops were being opened, and the servants were washing down the *trottoir*. She could see the French family opposite getting up, and the children turned out on the balcony,

while the room was swept and garnished. She could hear the trot of the horses on the asphalte, and smell the curious mingled odours, which are inseparable from Paris, of flowers, hot asphalte, and less pleasant smells, mixed up into one indescribable bouquet, that is unlike surely any other city in the world ; and at last, bit by bit, the whole of the awful events of the last twelve hours unrolled themselves before her, and she felt that, unless she was to be for ever lost, some action must be taken, and that at once. She opened her purse—just eight shillings and sixpence ; what could she do with eight shillings and sixpence in Paris, where she did not know a soul, and where she had no means either of earning or obtaining money ? Mechanically she put her hand up to her throat ; she had on the locket she always wore, with her cipher in tiny brilliants, and her husband's portrait inside, which might have cost £20, but would certainly not fetch £5, even had she had the vaguest idea how to dispose of the trinket. Altogether, with her one ring and her watch, she might be worth £30.

But how obtain that ? How set to work to earn more, in a place where she was absolutely friendless, but at the same time might at any moment come face to face with some of her many friends or acquaintances ?

The idea of remaining with Mr. Seymour, of casting in her lot with his, never seemed to her possible for one moment. Of course she knew what the world would say ; but despite her old affection for him, her old girlish passion, and the pleasure she always had felt in his society, she was far too cold, too unemotional to feel the wave of absolute frenzied passion, which would have carried her over the border-land and landed her in his arms at eighteen. Nay, later on even, she could have loved him passionately and devotedly ; but now, no : for him the world would never be well lost ; for him now she could feel nothing but ordinary friendship ; and yet, on him and his care, and, worse still, on his money, she was, for the moment, absolutely dependent.

And how dependent Jacinth was on some

male protection no one, save herself, knew. First her father had been her stay, then Bob had been always ready with his advice and countenance, and afterwards her husband had directed her life for her; and as long as she could recollect she had never settled any of her plans herself, had never even taken her own ticket, or planned a journey without half-a-dozen people to help her with suggestions and to superintend her goings forth and comings in, and now, what was to be her future? It was literally impossible for her to come to any conclusion in the matter; it was impossible for her even to think; the shock, the wearying day she had gone through, then the journey, and the absolute starvation she had endured—for she had not really had anything to eat since the dinner of the day before the publication of the *Wasp*—rendered it almost impossible for her to think properly. She felt that both she and Mr. Seymour were committed to a future neither of them desired, and yet at the same time she was firmly resolved that, wrong, wicked, terrible

as her conduct had been, from that moment she would endeavour to remake her life and to start fresh.

But even to come to that resolution she felt she must talk the matter over with Mr. Seymour, and ask his advice about the money. Naturally, they had had no opportunity of speaking since they left the office, for they had never been for one moment alone; and feeling that she must at once have some definite solution of the mystery of her future, she drank the coffee and ate the rolls the waiter had brought her, and washing her face, and making herself look as neat as she could without brushes and combs, she opened the door and looked cautiously out into the passage; but no one was there. She looked at her watch—it had stopped; but presently the hotel clock struck eight, and people began to open their doors and take in boots and hot water. Jacinth wandered back into her room, and stood looking idly out of the window. She dare not run the risk of losing herself in the hotel, and, knowing

nothing of Paris, dare not go out, for fear of never finding her way back. She had wound her watch and set it going, and presently she gazed at it again. The time seemed positively racing : nearly nine, and Mr. Seymour had not been near her since half-past six. What could have happened ? Had he returned to England, and left her alone, without money or means of raising money, in this strange land ? The hotel was wide awake now ; the odour of breakfast began to fill the air, and do battle with the other scents ; and Jacinth was almost in tears of despair, when the door opened cautiously, and Mr. Seymour came into the room.

Jacinth jumped up. "I'll come down at once," she said. "Where is the sitting-room ? And oh ! where have you been ? I have been imagining all kinds of things, and thought you must be killed, or gone back to England."

"I have been to see after the luggage," said Mr. Seymour, lightly. "You forget, we are both absolutely garmentless ; and I have also been to look out our route. It would be madness to stop in Paris. We will double

back, and take up our abode in a tiny village I know of, between this and Rouen; then we can mature our future, dearest, and settle what steps we had better take to ensure a living."

"I have eight shillings and sixpence in the world," replied Jacinth, piteously; "but I want you to tell me what I had better do. You must go back; there are Flora and the children, and your work; and all I want from you is a little advice. We were idiots to run away like this. After all, I ought to have taken any punishment my husband chose to inflict for my breach of confidence, my selling him for a mess of pottage; but you could have set matters straight for yourself. You are not to blame; you were right to do your utmost for your paper. You found me a ready tool; no one could blame you for that; but you have seen me safely here; tell me what I had better do with myself, and then go home. You must not wreck your future for one mad half-hour's folly. Let us go down and discuss the whole thing over breakfast; for, abject as is our position, one must eat."

“The breakfast is waiting for us,” said Mr. Seymour ; “but, Jacinth, you are not a child ; you must know that, after this, you and I must sail in the same boat. There is no help for it, and I am not going to pretend that I am not thankful to have my dear little sweetheart of old times all my own at last. We have to forget the past as quickly as we can, and make a good thing out of the future. I can find plenty to do in America, where I have already had several berths offered to me. Once your divorce and mine are settled, we can marry and be happy ever after ; and until then we must make the best we can of our position, which for me, at least, is a very good and perfect one. Darling, you know I have always loved you ;” and Mr. Seymour placed his arm round Jacinth, and drew her towards him.

For one brief mad moment she allowed herself to rest in his embrace ; then, fortunately for her, the French waiter, in the uncere-  
monious manner peculiar to Paris, knocked at the door and entered at the same moment,



announcing that breakfast was prepared in the "petit salon," and waited for them to pass out ; which Mr. Seymour did with a muttered curse, and Jacinth with a feeling that Providence had specially intervened to save her.

The waiter dismissed, and breakfast served, Mr. Seymour said, in a low tone of voice, "Don't let us discuss the future again, Jacinth ; take it for granted, as all the people here do, that we are married, and in the meantime let us enjoy our brief holiday. We can sail from Havre for America later, and until then all we must do is to enjoy the honeymoon we were defrauded of so many years ago. You and I were always meant for each other, darling. We have taken the law into our own hands, and we shall be as happy as we should have been had we never parted. I will show you the world. Think of New York and the thousand and one places you have never seen, the jovial life we shall lead, and the pleasant times we shall have together, and do not allude to anything again that was ours. All the past is a sealed book, as far as

we are concerned, and I will take care no one alludes to it in your presence;" and he leaned forward and took Jacinth's hand in his, and kissed it gently.

Jacinth withdrew it, as if she had been stung. "Mr. Seymour," she said, her voice faltering and her heart beating fast, "do not suppose for one moment I do not understand my position, or how good you have been to me, and would be now; but I am determined that you shall not suffer any more for me; and I am also determined that, weak, criminal, wicked as I have been, I will not sink lower in my own estimation than I have already done. Do you think," she added, speaking even lower than she had done before, "do you think I have never seen women who have left their husbands with other men, and seen how those men have ultimately treated them; how the world has stoned them to death with words and looks harder than rocks; how even the women who loved the men for whom they had left their homes and their honour suffered, and shrank from their

own shadows almost, when they realized what they were? And I, even—God help me!—do not love you, and should not have love to help me over the rough places. I used to love you; I loved you for years, truly, warmly, devotedly, I am not ashamed to confess it; but now I do not love you. I want your help, I want your friendship; but I have not anything, except friendship, to offer in exchange, and never shall have. And when you have helped me to come to some conclusion about my next step, we shall say good-bye. You will go back to Flora and the children, and I will dree my weird alone. I have destroyed one home; I have broken one heart. Even if I adored you, even had I the feeble excuse of loving you with the passionate love of bygone years, I would not have the destruction of another home, another heart, on my conscience. You have the children to think of, besides Flora.”

“I never can think of them for one moment in comparison with you,” exclaimed Mr. Seymour, passionately. “Flora has no heart, except for her babies. She may be annoyed

at being left, she may cry a little ; because she looks upon me as a protector of the house, and a scarer of ghosts and burglars at night, and will be frightened, no doubt, at being the sole person in charge of the establishment ; but she will soon find some one to console her and look after her. She has plenty of her own money, and the children to occupy her. The first attack of croup or measles will wipe out my memory, and she will be all right ; and as to the children themselves, they scarcely know me by sight, so they will not repine much if they never see me again."

"It is not that," said Jacinth, rising from her chair, and walking up and down ; "but think of the heritage of evil passions you will leave them. It is that which frightens me. A father who brings innocent babies into the world, and does not strive his hardest to leave them that best of all heritages, a fair name, is—ah! I cannot say what I think him. Look at the heritage my father left me ; why, his crime, his career, made me reckless. I had no unstained record to keep clean. All my

better dreams were always clouded by the idea that people were always saying, 'Her father's child!' and I looked on life as a playground, or a place where one had to snatch as much amusement as one could, without looking for aught beside. My plans, my ideas, have landed me here. Don't let your children think of you as I have always thought of my father, with hatred, with bitter shame, for it may cause them to despair as I have despaired. It may embitter them as it has embittered and ruined me;" and Jacinth threw herself back into her chair, and covered her face with her hands.

Mr. Seymour looked anxiously at her, and for a few moments he did not speak. He would have preferred a prosperous life, with the ball at his feet, the *Wasp* to rule successfully, and his comfortable home to rest in, if he could have managed to have continued all this, after the printing of Lord William's bill; but now that this was impossible, he was not a man to give up what he held in his hands as securely as he held Jacinth, and, to

do him justice, he really passionately adored her. All the old love had returned to him a thousand-fold. He had lost much—position, home, the London he worshipped, each stone of which was dear to him ; he was not going to lose anything else. Jacinth was beautiful ; the nine days' wonder that the divorce would cause would be so much capital in America ; besides, he knew too well what would be her probable fate were he to leave her to herself. Nothing should induce him to give her up ; he would defend her against the world ; would take care of her to her last breath and his.

But he would neither threaten nor frighten her ; he would temporise. Once more he looked at her ; then he said, quietly :

“ You must understand first, dear Jacinth, that my fate is in your hands. I adore you ; I worship you. By heavens ! I could fall at your feet, like a boy, and tell you my love-story ; but I will not. That you do not love me is all that I will recollect. Still I shall not leave you until you have some definite idea of your future, and I will see you settled

somewhere, where you can be at peace ; but we must leave Paris. We might be followed here at any moment, and I would rather see you safely out of danger of a meeting with your husband ; then I will return and bear the brunt of his rage. I had settled to go to a tiny village close to Boulogne to-day. Shall we go there now ? I have boxes at the station for you. I have thought of all you could want, and I know a little place where you could remain unknown about, unheard of."

"Let us go straight to Boulogne," said Jacinth, feverishly. "You will be on your way home then, and we shall be near the papers, and see if the news has got abroad yet. Oh ! how ashamed I am of my life—of myself. I wish I were dead, and out of the way of every one."

"You must not be a baby, dearest," replied Mr. Seymour, gently. "Now especially, when we must act, and we must go at once. The train starts in half an hour for Boulogne, and I have to pay this bill and take care we are not followed. We ought to be safe for

another eight hours ; but I forget how the boats run, and also I don't know, naturally, whether they have discovered our whereabouts. I must cover the trail, if I can. How tired you must be, and there's another journey before you!" And so saying he rang the bell, and, having settled the account, they were soon on their way to Boulogne, their faces turned once more towards England.

Jacinth had plenty of time to meditate on her future during that dreary journey, but could see no light on the dark horizon ; and when she found herself settled in the rooms at the hotel, with her new possessions around her, and Mr. Seymour departed in search of English papers, she began to wonder if she could ever face life alone again, and if she would have the strength to save herself and go out into the world quite, quite by herself. She was gazing drearily out across the harbour and listening to the wind, which had risen and was howling angrily round her windows, when the handle of the door turned and a small veiled figure came hastily into the room. She



was about to protest against the intrusion, when the veil was thrown up, and, to her horror and astonishment, she discovered that she was face to face with Francis Seymour's wife.

For one second she could not help fancying that fate had played her false, and that she imagined the curious, untidy, sobbing little figure before her ; but presently she was forced to believe in the reality of her presence, for Mrs. Seymour was weeping on her knees before Jacinth, and holding the skirts of her dress in her hands so tightly that for a few minutes she could not move.

"You don't speak to me," sobbed Mrs. Seymour, frantically ; "and it's me that shouldn't speak to you, but I must. I've followed you here, and I have come to beg you to let Frank go—to let him come back to me. He doesn't really want to leave me and the children, I am sure of that. He always said I was a fool ; but I made him comfortable, and never grumbled at being left, and so I am sure you will let him come back. He is rather cross at times, and will hate you if you can't

see after his comforts, and I know you won't; besides, you've got one husband; you can't and shan't have him too;" and she clutched Jacinth yet tighter, and almost shook her in her abject dread and despair.

Jacinth passed her hand over her forehead, which was aching frantically, and felt more bewildered than ever.

"How did you come here?" she asked, wearily.

"They saw you start in the tidal train and so they came to me," said Mrs. Seymour, delightfully vague about who "they" might be. "Of course, then I had to come by Boulogne and Folkestone as soon as I could, and when I got here I saw Frank coming out of this hotel. I wouldn't speak to him, but I rushed in here and asked for the lady that gentleman had just left, and they showed me up here. I said I wanted to surprise you, and so I did; but you'll give him back to me, won't you, and go away to your own husband? You can't be a wicked woman, and if you knew how I love him, and how proud the children

were of their dear papa, you would never ruin us all as you are doing now."

"My dear Mrs. Seymour," said Jacinth, raising the silly little weeping creature from the floor, "I can assure you I have not the least intention of stealing your husband, and neither have I meant to do so. He was kind enough to take care of me when I did not quite know what I should do. He was going to see me settled down here, and was then going back to you and the children; so pray don't distress yourself so dreadfully. He is a very old friend of mine, and kind as all old friends are; but he isn't going to leave you all alone, and you must not be cross with him if he left you to help an old friend who was in great distress," and she attempted to soothe the little woman, putting her hand gently on her shoulder.

But Mrs. Seymour shook her shoulders impatiently. "Frank is always calling me a fool," she said, "but I'm not quite such a fool as to believe in such nonsense as that. Why didn't your husband help you in your trouble? What does a married woman want with an

old friend? I have been warned about you more than once, but, until my sister and her husband came rushing in to say they had seen you and Frank setting off in the tidal train just as they came back from Blackheath, I never believed a word against you; but now I know it's all true, and when you've pretended to like me and be my friend, you've only done it to wean Frank away from me. I've heard of such women as you, but I never believed they existed before I knew you. But I won't call you names," she added frantically. "I don't want to hurt you. I only want you to give Frank up—to go away before he comes in, and never see him any more. Then I'll forgive you and do all I can for you, but you must give him up. He does belong to me, and he's the children's father."

Jacinth rose slowly and looked round for her hat and gloves. She would go away; she would leave Francis Seymour, as she meant to do, and she would vanish before he came back, if she could. "You need not think me false to you," she said. "I never pretended

to anything. I did, I do like you, and I never meant to steal your husband. I have done very, very wrong, and have forfeited my own husband's love and esteem, or I shouldn't have been here at all. Your husband was the oldest friend I had, he was the only one who could help me. I assure you, you have very, very little to blame me for."

"I shall not blame you at all, if you'll only go now!" said Mrs. Seymour, seizing the jacket Jacinth had cast off and helping her into it. "I will take care your boxes shall be all right; you can come back for them after the boat has left, can't you? At any rate, do, do go! I know Frank, I know he meant to leave me and go away with you, and I am sure he'll say dreadful things to me before you if he finds us here together. He may be as dreadful as he likes if we are alone, and I don't mind, but he's not going to abuse me before you; you'd remember it and be pleased, and would never believe he was sorry after. Oh!" she added, frantically, "I don't know half what I am saying, only

do, please, go and then I shall know you are really sorry," and she half pushed, half dragged Jacinth towards the door.

Jacinth looked down at her mournfully. She knew so well how the whole thing would end ; how furious Mr. Seymour would be for a little while, how really glad he would be to be saved from the consequences of a moment of madness. She would be the only person to suffer ; she, with her empty purse, and her absolute loss of home, of reputation, of everything that makes life worth living. She shuddered as she thought of the world outside, and of what her future must be. Why should she go at the bidding of this little imbecile? After all, Francis Seymour loved her, had been her own early love ; she would have his care, his protection. Then she remembered how much she owed. If she were ever to repair her ways, retrace her steps, be happy again, she must now begin restitution. She would go, of course, but, womanlike, she must protest to the last. "I have nowhere to go," she said.

“Go to your own home, to your own husband,” said Mrs. Seymour, opening the door. “He will forgive you. Tell him the truth. I shall forgive Frank, who is a man and ought to have known better ; so, of course, Lord William will forgive you, and when I go home I shall tell him to, if you’ll only go now!” and, without another word, she gently pushed Jacinth down the passage to the stairs, and watched her as she walked down the hotel hall, and out at the swing door, while, a feverish idea seizing her that she might meet Frank in the street and vanish with him once more into dim space, she rushed back to the window in time to see Jacinth’s stately figure disappear round one corner, just before her husband came round the other from the town. Then she rushed to the dingy glass over the mantel-piece, fluffed up her fringe, dried her eyes, and put her hat as straight as she could, turning her veil, and endeavouring to make herself as pleasant to look at as was possible under the circumstances. But if she had had any real doubts on the

subject of her husband's intentions or of his feelings towards her, they would have been entirely dissipated when she saw his face fall, and heard him say, in accents of the greatest scorn, "What the devil brought you here, I should like to know, and where is Lady William?" throwing down on the table, at the same time, a whole budget of newspapers and a large bouquet of flowers he had bought to make the room look a little less grimy than he knew it must in the fastidious eyes of his lady-love.

Mrs. Seymour's eyes flashed ominously, and she drew her small figure up to its greatest possible height. "The devil brought you, Francis, not me," she said, grandiloquently, "and Lady William knows that as well as I do. I've come to take you home to the children, and to save you from yourself and the result of your evil passions."

"Don't talk such blethering rot!" exclaimed her husband, angrily. "You're a miserable little idiot; and what you are doing out of your nursery passes my comprehension. I've



only been gone half-an-hour, and shouldn't have been gone so long, only I wanted these flowers. She cannot have gone far. I'll run after her ;" and he was making for the door, when Mrs. Seymour made a dash towards it, locked it quickly, and threw the key out into the street before he knew where he was.

"You don't go after her ever again," she said, stamping her foot like a fury. "I won't stand tamely by and see myself and the children disgraced for ever, and made the laughing-stock of the whole place ; for, whether she's innocent or whether she's guilty, the woman whose husband has left her is disgraced in the sight of the world, and that is just what I won't be ; besides, I know you better than you think I do. Lady William is far too grand to look after your comforts as I look after them, and you'd find you couldn't live long on her airs and graces. Besides, I am not going to plead with you. I am going to save you from yourself, and then you'll have to beg my pardon. And, I can tell you, you won't get it all at once."

And Mrs. Seymour shook with mingled fear and despair, and clenched her fist angrily.

Despite the absolute tragedy of the situation, Mr. Seymour burst into a positive peal of laughter. To hear his wife—his meek, low-voiced, spiritless wife—stamp and assert herself, ruffling up her feathers like an infuriated hen protecting her chickens, struck him as so absolutely ridiculous that even at such a supreme moment as this he could not avoid seeing the ludicrous side of the situation. He felt as if some tiny mouse had flown in his face and given him a violent scratch ; and if he had died the next moment, he still would have been obliged to indulge in a roar of laughter, which made Mrs. Seymour in such a passion that she could hardly refrain from flying at him and striking him. At last she said: “When you’ve quite done laughing, perhaps you’ll remember the boat starts in about a quarter of an hour.”

“Boat ! nonsense,” said Mr. Seymour, at last stifling his laughter, and recollecting the situation. “How can I go back to England,

you little idiot? In the first place, Lord William would probably take the earliest opportunity he could of shooting me, and in the second, I am not going to be such a cur as to leave that poor woman alone here. Do you know that she is absolutely without either clothes or money, and yet I suppose you have frightened her away with your violence. You may be surprised to learn that she had already declined to cast in her lot with mine, though I can assure you I implored her to do so with all the eloquence I possessed; and had you only had the sense to be a little diplomatic we could have managed the whole thing perfectly well. Your presence here would have made things all right in the eyes of the world, and Lady William would have been saved. As it is I can't think what we can do, especially as you've been such an imbecile about the key. Go after her I must and will, and I suppose I had better ring the bell and ask the waiter to bring up the key, telling him you're a little eccentric;" and Mr. Seymour rang the bell,

and had the satisfaction of explaining to the waiter the mysterious disappearance of the door key, while Mrs. Seymour, still trembling with rage, said : " Where you go I go ; if you depart out of this room I shall follow you like your shadow ; and I want to get home too ; if we don't catch this boat we shall have to wait until to-morrow, and you know I must be back to see after the children."

" You are a perfect idiot ; I always thought so, now I am sure of it," said her husband, savagely. " Lady William must and shall be found, and that before we leave Boulogne. Don't I tell you that she is absolutely penniless, and that something must be done for her. If you had the heart of a woman you would be as anxious about her as I am ;" and Mr. Seymour rushed to the window and gazed out at the waiter, who was still looking for the key.

" Listen to me, Frank. I will have you listen," said Mrs. Seymour, furiously. " I tell you if I could save that woman from starvation by lifting up my finger I wouldn't do it. You may have thought I didn't know all about the

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manner in which you and she have been corresponding and meeting and behaving, but I did, and I know also all about the old love affair. I know all about your sentimental affection for her, and the nonsense you have talked, and I have said nothing, because I knew exactly what you were. It flattered the vain, sentimental side of your nature to have a secret love affair with a woman in that position, but you've quite forgotten the other side of your nature, the one which loves comfort and success. I have not. I know you're fond of me on that side, and I know when you have your senses you prefer to be respectable, and, therefore, I am not going to allow you for one moment to see her or go after her again. She is clever enough to extricate herself from the mess she has got herself into, and I am extricating you from your share in it. You will be grateful enough to me presently. Leave money and instructions here for her to have the boxes she brought here—though she is without clothes, according to your account—and come back home;" and, so saying, Mrs.

Seymour forgot her rage, burst into tears, and threw her arms round her husband's neck.

At this moment the key was heard in the door, which was scarcely opened by the waiter before Mr. Seymour was out of the room and into the street. He rushed wildly up one part of the town, then into another, making enquiries about Lady William in every hotel and in every place he could think of. He went to the police and to the Mairie, but nowhere had anyone answering to the description he gave of her been seen, and he was at his wits' end.

It was ghastly to think of her wandering somewhere, footsore, hungry, penniless, like some mendicant : she who through the worst part of her life had never felt even an indication of want, or the misery of being homeless in the street. Only a day before she had been the admiration and envy of many ; now not one would change places with her. To make matters worse, the moaning wind had increased almost to a tempest ; the mist and cloud rolled in over the harbour ; darkness came on ; it

began to rain. Mr. Seymour was wet through and absolutely helpless; he could do no more; he felt he was powerless.

It was, after all, such an abject position; such a hopeless one. He had played on Jacinth's vanity; he had availed himself of her difficulties to, as he hoped, elevate his paper to the greatest possible pinnacle of success; and he found himself instead, by one evil turn of fortune's wheel, utterly destroyed, as far as his literary career was concerned, and overwhelmed with the consciousness of his own and Lady William's actual ruin. He had thought himself so clever, so sure of being able to wriggle out of the position by mysterious hints as to how he had obtained possession of the bill, that when he discovered himself simply in the position of a dupe, of an easily deceived man, palming off nonsense on the public, instead of giving them the earliest edition of the real scheme, he had felt as if he could only revenge himself on the purveyor of the intelligence, or at least use her again to obtain what he was so

anxious to possess. He had drawn Lady William to the office, and this made matters absolutely hopeless at once. When he thought of the whole muddle, of what to do next, he felt as if his brain would turn, and now Lady William was gone, and he knew not what to do.

The rain pelted down in torrents, the wind howled louder than ever, and hoping feebly that Lady William might have returned to the hotel, thinking that they had started for England, Mr. Seymour staggered back, wet through and half dead with fatigue, suspense, and misery. But he only saw his wife's small face, looking smaller and more piteous than ever, before he sank down insensible on the sofa, happily oblivious, for some time at least, of the real position of affairs, and of the fact that she to whom he owed so much, and with whose future life he had hoped to have linked his own, had disappeared as effectually as if her very existence had been blotted out from the world, into the outer darkness of which she appeared to be engulfed entirely.



## CHAPTER V.

### "AN OUTCAST AND WANDERER."

IN the streets of an unknown town, with the rain pouring down, and the wind rising higher every moment, with eight shillings and sixpence in her pocket in foreign coin, and absolutely no means of obtaining clothes or more money, Jacinth was already beginning to realise what homeless beggars must feel when there is positively nothing between them and destitution, save the workhouse or the casual ward. She had lost her way ; indeed, poor creature, she had no way to lose. She was worn out, hungry and wretched, and utterly unable to decide what she must do for a night's shelter. She knew no one in Boulogne, no one knew her, and with only that small sum in her possession it was certainly impossible to go to an hotel, even when she knew she had

jewellery on her that would have covered any bill she was likely to add up for the one night; and she was almost inclined to wander out into the open country beyond the higher part of the town, and seek shelter under some possible haystack, when she remembered that in a Roman Catholic country there must be some sisterhood, where for one night, at least, she could be safe, and where she would, probably, be able to learn how to dispose of her trinkets in such a way as to enable her to get back to London. There, at all events, she would be within reach of those who could and must help her, even if the worst came to the worst; and oh! bitter shame, her husband rid himself of her through the easy medium of the divorce court. But directly the idea of the sisters came to her she determined to seek them out. She knew that there, at all events, for the moment she would be safe, and returning to the brighter parts of the town where the shops were lighted and people were about, Jacinth made inquiries, which resulted in her finding herself at a

narrow doorway surmounted by a cross, at which she knocked with a trembling hand, and which was speedily opened to her by a sister clad in the orthodox black serge robe and white winged cap, with which all are so familiar. It was but a confused story after all that Jacinth poured into the ear of the sister, who, with all the curiosity of a *religieuse*, plied her with questions in such rapid French that Jacinth could hardly understand half she said ; but by the time she had put together a history of strayed luggage and lost friends and absent money, which satisfied the sister that she was a proper person to admit inside her chaste walls, Lady William's white face and sad eyes so appealed to her that she bustled her into the sparsely furnished visitor's room, with its flagged floor and great black crucifix, and telling her she would see about a bedroom and get her some coffee at once, she hurried away to tell the Curé of their visitor, and to obtain his advice as to what the sisters should do with a fashionably dressed lady, whose garments bore every trace

of a hurried flight, and whose face looked to the sister's practised eye as if a severe illness were imminent. But the Curé bid sister Marie Christine feed and warm her drenched visitor first, after which he would interview the lady, and doubtless would be told the truth at once.

Jacinth had sunk down into the hard rush-seated chair by the fireless stove, and was thinking, thinking, thinking what on this earth she would do next. She looked at the white and black room, the excessive cleanness and emptiness of which seemed to chill her mentally as well as bodily. She gazed at the black cross with the white Saviour stretched for ever on the painful arms—at the bowed head and the crown of thorns—and thought bitterly that He was, after all, but a type of all mankind, and that each human soul hung for ever on its own cross, exposed to the jeers of the cruel world, and fastened there, before birth almost, by the agonising nails of heredity and absence of free will. Then she remembered how absolutely through her own fault she found herself where she was ; how

exceptional had been her chances, how entirely perfect her life might have been had she only chosen ; only to recall, at the same time, that Love, the one unerring maker of a real marriage, had been absent from her wedding, and that whatever had come to her in life had just not been perfect, had just been not quite a success.

If she had only loved her husband as she had began by loving her old sweetheart ! If only his voice had thrilled her, his touch enthralled her as in the dear old days Francis Seymour's voice and touch had had power to do ! but they never had. She had liked him as a companion, she had welcomed him as a means of escape from the poverty and wretchedness of Bevercombe, but she had had neither love nor sympathy to give him in return. She had rebelled violently and vigorously at his scheme of life, and she had wilfully wrecked herself so utterly, so entirely, that nothing save an absolute miracle could save her from positive destitution and degradation.

Then, almost for the first time, she thought

of her husband, of what he must be suffering, and of what he must be thinking of her. She had often said that he did not love her ; that because he would not allow her to live the aimless foolish existence of a woman of fashion that he must care nothing for her ; but now in her agony she knew all too well how his tender care had shielded her, had encircled her, had proved silently, but none the less conclusively, how absolutely she had, after all, been his first thought, the first object of his care and affection.

Oh ! if she were only at home, only once more safe at Windyholme ! The wind which was shrieking round the house at Boulogne would be screaming round the empty house there. She could hear the soft pattering of the never-ceasing rain against the hall windows, the swaying and creaking of the pines, and the loud roar of the sea on the shingly beach of the tiny cove beyond the avenue, sounds which had often driven her nearly wild as she lay back in her luxurious chair, the wood fire crackling cheerily, and a

heap of papers and magazines and new books on the cushions at her feet, where the dogs lay about comfortably, listening every now and then for Lord William, and growling a little when a louder blast than usual shook the windows and cast the rain smartly like blows from a whip against the rattling panes.

Why did she always remember the rain? It seemed always raining when she thought of Bevercombe or Windyholme—of Bevercombe; ah, poor Bob; what would he say to this second blow? What would he do, now that his attempts to restore the family prestige had received this cruel stab from her hand? Jacinth absolutely cowered before the thought of what she had done.

She could see the library at Bevercombe so well. She could see Bob, his bright face clouded, perhaps his eyes dimmed with tears, stumble down the stone steps and cast himself and his troubles at Barbara's feet. She could hear Barbara's soft voice persuading him to wait to learn whether there was not some mistake, while her gentle hand smoothed

back the tumbled hair from her husband's forehead, and she soothed him as only her voice and touch could do.

Jacinth supposed they knew by now. When did she leave home? When was the last time she had seen her husband? Was it yesterday? She seemed as if she could not remember. She had lost all count of time; all idea of anything save that she could lie down and sleep and sleep, as if she would never wake again. Why should she wake? To be the scoff of the whole world; to find herself branded and shunned as an outcast, and a pariah; as a Judas who had sold her master for money; as an unfaithful wife, unprotected and spurned by the man for whom she had lost all. For Jacinth knew only too well what the world would say to Francis Seymour's return home to his wife and children, and felt certain that not one of the bitter sneers she had cast at others in her time would be spared her; and that in Barford, as in London, people were already speaking of her as she had spoken often enough of others.



The shame, the bitter, scorching, abject shame of guilt, canvassed by everyone, known to everyone, seized her like an access of passion. She felt herself blushing warmly at her own thoughts; she would have exchanged with the humblest creature on the earth; with one of the lowest of the working sisters, had she been able again to face life honestly and boldly, and felt herself good once more, good and sinless as a child in the earliest nursery days; good as she felt when she knelt at her confirmation, her heart full of the hopes and plans of all enthusiastic maidens at such a time, as she resolved, whoever else failed, that she would make her mark in the world, and leave it just a little bit better because she, Jacinth Merridew, had lived in it.

The real, actual consequences of sin for the first time seemed revealed to her. The absolute impossibility as long as she lived of ever ridding herself of the stain appalled her. The dreadful idea that she could not sin to herself alone struck through her heart like an arrow as the thought of the home she had

made desolate, of the frightful harm her crime and her extravagance had done.

The remembrance of the village, of her husband's pride in his scheme, of his positive certainty that his bill would save England from despair and loss, overwhelmed her like a flood; her hand seemed to have loosed a perfect avalanche of woe, her touch seemed to have ruined the whole country. Why had she been born, if on her shoulders were to rest such terrible responsibilities?

The old allegory of the stone thrown into the pond making the ever-widening circles came back to her remembrance. She seemed to see the water, the clear shining water like one of her own heath-set Dorset pools, as bright as crystal, reflecting nothing save the sedges at the edge, and the sweet blue sky, with its shifting white clouds drifting along, and then the surface was marred and broken, the rings grew and grew and grew, until they surged into the edge of the pool, where they stirred up the thick mud, and appeared to widen out even beyond that.

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Jacinth sat there, her hands clasped on her lap, her lips pressed together, and her brow fixed, as if she were enduring absolute physical agony ; a dull, never-ceasing pain seemed to gnaw her chest ; she grew cold and sick and faint ; her head throbbed ; yet still she saw the pool and the circling water, never stopping, never ceasing, always rippling unceasingly towards her feet. If she could have dragged herself back on her knees to her husband she would have done so. She felt so sorry for all she had injured ; so sorry for Lord William ; so sorry, so sorry for Bob, and for Windyholme, and the Duchess. Yes, even for the Duchess, who had been so kind to her, so sure she would influence her husband rightly and save him from the consequences of his quixotic folly. She save her husband ! Ah ! if only he would save her ; if only he could put out that strong tender hand and draw her back into the shelter of home once more, into the silence and warm safety of his loving arms ! But he could never forgive her treachery, never

believe that the woman who had sold her husband had not done so to a man to whom she had given all the love, all the affection, she had so often and so coldly withheld from him.

Thank God, she had been saved that last absolute degradation. She was pure in deed, if not in absolute thought. He would not have that last worst unforgiveable sin to condone, should they ever meet again; should she ever be able to fall at his feet, and beg him to forgive her wickedness and folly.

Once more she raised her head and looked at the cross; the white Saviour gleamed in the light of the flickering lamp. She had never thought much about religion; it bored her to go to church and listen to bad music, and the aimless platitudes of a beardless deacon, or the blundering rubbish poured out week after week by the old vicar of Fulbrook, whose one idea had always been to get through the sermon quickly, and get back to the dinner which was waiting for him across the churchyard, and who, therefore, left out as much of the service as he possibly could,

and gave ten minutes' sermon of the most flabby description ; and, in consequence, she had never gone to church unless Bob was about, and took her as a matter of course ; and she felt she could not fall back now on a help she had disdained, or, rather, never thought about, in her days of prosperity. It would be too mean to become religious because she was miserable, to beg for assistance from One whose work she had never done, whose help she felt she was not entitled to now. She wished feebly that she were good, like Barbara, that she had never carelessly ignored the childish creeds she used to listen to her sister-in-law, imparting to Brian and Betty on Sundays with a faith as absolute and childlike as their own, but she had never done so ; she had, therefore, absolutely no one to ask for help, not one soul in earth, not one in a possible distant cloudy heaven.

A half-formed wish that she had been brought up a Romanist flickered through her brain. She would then have sought her priest,

asked his help, and, after absolution, gone out into the world again cleansed and free from all stain. But Jacinth was too clever, too logically minded to credit such a faith as this, and she would have preferred the dreary creed, or lack of creed, of an agnostic, to mere superstitious belief in the powers of a man as feeble, as fallible as herself. No; on that side, too, she had no hope; no helping hand to grasp.

Oh! to be dead; to lie down and sleep, and never wake; to sleep in the warm, fire-lit room, in the cosy bed at home, her limbs filled with the rapture of fatigue which is melting into forgetfulness, and her brain soothed by the wings of the sleep-angel, as she had so often fallen asleep in the Windyholme room, but with her satisfaction marred by the remembrance of the dull to-morrow, which would inevitably come and rouse her from her warmth and comfortable rest. Now, if she could only sleep and never wake any more; if she could glide away out into some wide sea, where she could feel she was happy, yet leave behind her all her sin, all her miseries,

all her consciousness of self! Would death bring such a sleep as this? Would it bring a still deeper one, like the one from which she had been aroused the day she was born, before which she knew and remembered no more than she hoped and prayed she should know when she slipped out of her body, and left the world altogether? A keen shiver ran through her. She could not believe that.

Once more the face of the suffering Saviour caught her eye; could such a sacrifice as that have been for nothing?

She rose impatiently to her feet, but could not stand. She was too tired, too faint, for want of food, and she thought angrily that unless the sister came soon to her assistance that she should have solved the great mystery for herself, and have no opportunity for thinking out the other still more marvellous mystery typified by that figure on the black cross, at which she began to glance apprehensively, as in the shadows the Face appeared to look appealingly at her, and then to change so very sorrowfully that she

began to believe He was reproaching her for nailing Him on that instrument of torture.

Jacinth seemed to understand how the state of body, rather than that of mind, causes converts; starvation was causing her half her misery. Another hour of starvation and she would, she thought recklessly, be a converted creature, ready to join the Salvation Army and relate her experiences with the rest of them, or she would be a ready morsel for Rome's capacious jaws, and join anything that promised her rest and freedom from the gnawing tooth of remorse, which seemed to have made her breast its own. She could not cry, her eyes burned, her lips were parched; she could do nothing save sit and think and think, and every now and then glance over her shoulder at the wan figure on the ebony cross.

But, at last, after what seemed to her a life-time, but which was certainly not more than twenty minutes, the good sister came in bringing a steaming basin of broth, and proceeded to bustle about, to place it where



Jacinth could get it easiest. Then, when she saw her patient could swallow, and, indeed, did so most eagerly, she rubbed her hands together gleefully, and said, "The Curé is always right ; he said 'soup, not coffee,' and that is why I have been long. There was none in the house, somehow, and I had to send to the hotel ; but your bed is ready, and the fire is crackling, and you must rest. To-morrow the Curé will see you, and find your friends, and you will quite forget this bad day," and then seeing Jacinth up into the bedroom, she put some wood on the fire, and promising to come back for her clothes to brush and dry, she left her for a while, only returning as she had promised, and to pour down her throat a glass of strong brandy and water, which caused Jacinth to sleep as soundly as she could desire, and which, no doubt, saved her from the severe illness which the sister quite expected would fall to her share.

When Jacinth was really asleep, the little sister crept into the Curé's room, bearing her heavy cloth dress in her hand. "We shall

now know all about her," she said. "Here is the number in the bodice and the address where this was made, and here in the pocket a letter;" and she held out an envelope addressed to Lady William at Windyholme.

The Curé took the letter and copied the address word for word. Neither he nor the sister could read or speak English, but they had friends who could. "If this Lady William does have the illness we can send now," he said, complacently, "but if she is well in the morning, and will go, we cannot help it; we cannot interfere with her, she is a free agent."

"You will see her, Father?" asked the sister, eagerly. "She has a story and she is miserable. She is in despair, too, and you know how bad, how bad is despair?"

"We cannot interfere," repeated the Curé. "If she is ill, well and good; if she is well, better still. It is never well to mix ourselves up in these things. Probably she has quarrelled with her husband; if so, to-morrow she will be very glad to go back to him. I heard just now that an Englishman was searching for

this lady, and I have sent to tell him where she is ; no doubt they will be friends to-morrow. In the meantime, see to the dress being dry ; to-morrow we will see how she is, and act accordingly ;" and, so saying, the Curé turned to his meagre supper, and the good sister pattered away into the kitchen, where she chattered to her heart's content over the wonderful garments of the English lady, and almost wept at the bedraggled condition of the fine silk underskirts which no amount of cleansing would ever restore to their pristine splendour.

Jacinth slept uninterruptedly until about two o'clock on the following day ; and when she arose and looked about her, she could not at first remember anything about herself ; but, at last, all came back to her, and she dressed herself hurriedly, determining to escape as soon as she could, and to take the earliest boat back to England. On leaving her room, she found the sister waiting for her. " You will now see the Curé ?" she asked.

" Yes, certainly," replied Jacinth, " if only to thank him for his thought of the soup.

See how well I am ; and, of course, I ought to be ill in bed with rheumatic fever, at least. But, somehow, nothing hurts me ; if my life had been of the least value I should have been half dead ; as it isn't worth a franc, here I am quite well and strong."

"No life is worth so little as that," said the Curé, who had heard her last speech. "That you have been spared by the good God shows your work is not done, and you have friends. An English lady came here and left you money and a message ; your boxes are found, and will be sent to the English steamer, which leaves at half-past four. Her husband is ill, she said, or she would have seen you herself. He got wet, too, last night, and is in bed, and she seemed troubled. I trust, madame, all is well with you ?"

Jacinth took no notice of his last remark. Of course, Mrs. Seymour was the lady who had left her money and the message. How could she take the money—Francis Seymour's money ? But she must. Of course, once in England, she could repay it.

"Was the gentleman very ill?" she asked.

"Oh! no; only unable to go home to-day," said the Curé, "and Mrs. Seymour said she thought you had better not wait for them, you would be anxious to return. There is not much time, if you are," he added. "I have a *fiacre* here, and will see you on board if you wish; but, first, cannot I help you? We are accustomed to sorrow, and it seems to me you have been in trouble."

Jacinth smiled bitterly. "Such trouble as mine never enters these peaceful walls, and you could not understand it," she said. "I do not understand it myself. I am not of your religion, Father, and cannot find help in man. I must dree my own weird," she added in English, much to the Curé's dismay. "But, believe me, I am truly grateful for all you say and all your kindness. I must catch the boat, for the sooner I am in England the better;" and, so saying, and bidding adieu to the kind sister, she took the money the Curé had given her, leaving an ample recompense for her shelter, and was soon on her way to

England, bearing with her the added sorrow of her short flight in Mr. Seymour's company, and the sting caused by the remembrance that it was to his money she was indebted for the means of escape from France.

All through the long journey she was engaged in making plans and wondering what on earth she could do for a mere living. She looked at the boxes—brand-new boxes, bought in Paris, and filled with she knew not what. At all events, these would look respectable when she sought for lodgings; where, she had not the least idea. She, who had once known her London thoroughly, was at her wits' end. She had the rest of the £20 which Mr. Seymour had left for her, her boxes, and the garments she was in. Best seek some spot where much would not be required. Where could that be?

At last, she suddenly recollected the long, hideous, out-of-the-way road which leads past Euston Station—that ghastly thoroughfare which is, somehow, always dirty, and where the frequenters of the street are utterly unlike

any other people in the busier parts of London. In all her life, Jacinth had only driven past it on her way to the station. She had never walked there; she never knew any one who had. Surely she would be safe in such a locality as that. It was miles from Waterloo—Bob's Station, Lord William's station. The Duke always went from Charing Cross; no one she ever knew went down that road, except at night, on their way to Scotland. Surely she recollected sundry square white cards in the windows inscribed with lodgings to let? At any rate she would try. The dirt and squalor must mean cheapness, and her money must be hoarded until she could look round her and see what she could do.

Jacinth wondered how long her money would last; it was not quite as much as she had given for the very ordinary dress she had on. On this she would have to exist. Could she write? As Lady William Petersfield, purveyor of society scandal and writer for the *Wasp*, she had earned an easy £300

a year, and often had earned at the rate of a larger income. Would she find any market for wares dated from the Euston Road, and without the hall-mark of fashionable intelligence? She doubted it. However, she meant to try.

By the time she had come to this conclusion she had reached Victoria. It was beginning to grow a little dark; her plan of underground to Gower Street must fall through. Ruinous as the fare might be to those unknown regions, a cab was necessary. For the first time for years she found her own luggage, and having seen it hoisted on the hansom, she gave the vague address, "the Euston Road," which evidently satisfied her cabman, for he drove off swiftly, and Jacinth looked out once more on the London which even then she could not help regarding with the utmost affection.

As she drove rapidly along down Victoria Street, she suddenly caught sight of the Houses of Parliament, and remembered that to-night was Thursday. To-night, the very



night set apart for Lord William's speech : of course he would not be there. Ah ! where was he ? At that moment a block in the street stayed her hansom's rapid flight ; the cabman had gone slightly out of his way, and was trying to cross over and get up round by Charing Cross. Jacinth gazed out at the crowd, at the lights round the Square, and the big clock. Presently she sat up and looked farther out ; as she did so she caught sight of the well-known livery of the Dorsets. Coming straight along, the horses stepping well together, the cream and satin livery looking more than usually spotless, was the brougham her husband and the Duke always used when they went to their respective Houses. Jacinth sank back into the cab, but fixed her gaze on the rapidly advancing carriage ; it flashed by her, but not before she had seen her husband and the Duke, their heads close together, bending over a mass of papers they appeared to be sorting.

When the carriage passed, Jacinth leaned out of the cab again, and she had just time to see

it disappear beyond the gates which lead into the House of Commons, when the cab-horse sprang forward, and she found herself driving along towards her destination. At first a perfect access of passionate rage seized her. She comprehended in one moment what it meant. She had not ruined his life after all. Her absence, her disgrace, her flight, had not so much as ruffled her husband's quiet determination to carry his bill at any cost. She was to be allowed to glide into outer darkness, and not one soul was to hold out a hand to save her from herself.

This was too much. She had repented, had grieved, had sorrowed for her husband's sufferings as much as for her own. She had been so bitterly, bitterly sorry for him, and here he was, cool, quiet, and collected, ready to face the House, able calmly to keep his hand on the helm at such a time as this, and bring forward a measure that would require all his statesmanship, all the nerve he possessed, to lay it before the House in such a way as to ensure the ultimate passage of

a bill which would revolutionise the whole existant state of the land laws.

And this he could do without a quiver, without one atom of feeling, one attempt at a search for the woman he had professed to adore, in whose arms he had slept, and for whom he would have considered the world well lost. If only she could have reached Francis Seymour at that instant, Jacinth, in her passionate rage at the cold-hearted man who was her husband, would have gone back to him, and been lost for evermore ; but not only was the sea between them, but Mrs. Seymour was in possession, and she had no intention of facing her again.

Should she drive up to Dorset House and take her place there as if nothing had happened? After all, nothing had happened for which the law could turn her from her lawful shelter ; but Jacinth was too much of a coward to face anything, else she would never have been in her present position. She thought of the stares of the servants, the cool disdainful look of the Duchess, her husband's stern face

and hard voice ; the face and voice she had heard and seen once when the battle of the bills had been fought and lost ; and she had no desire to see either or hear again. She would kill him, she felt now, if he returned fresh from his triumph and sneered at her statement of her flight.

Presently she looked up ; the cabman had deposited her at the Euston Hotel, an obsequious waiter came out, the cab was paid and the boxes in the hotel before Jacinth had recovered her senses. After all, one night there could not matter ; to-morrow would be time to look for lodgings ; to-morrow, when she would have read the reception of Lord William's speech, and have discovered whether her fancy had played her false or not ; and giving her maiden name to the waiter, she engaged her rooms, and sat down to contemplate the future anew, under the fresh aspect discovered by the sight of her husband calmly pursuing his avocations among the ruins of his domestic life.

Meanwhile, at Dorset House, the two

Duchesses were seated in the small drawing-room, waiting breathlessly for the return of their relatives. The dusky May twilight had been shut out, but only one rose-shaded lamp was lighted, and the little room was nearly dark. The Dowager Duchess held the evening paper in her hand, but made no pretence of reading it, while the little Duchess was quietly crying, her tears falling slowly down her cheek. The silver clock rang out ten. At last the Duchess said: "It has begun."

The younger lady crept out of her chair, and sinking down by her mother-in-law's side, hid her face in her lap. "I cannot bear the suspense," she said. "If, after all he has done and suffered for this measure, it should be hooted down, I think I should go out of my mind. That wretched woman!"

"Let her drift out of our lives and be forgotten," said the Duchess slowly. "She has done evil enough. Thank God, William sees it all as we do. He will let her go. He will not allow her to ruin his career as she

has done his happiness. What a creature ; what a viper we have nursed on our hearth ! To sell her husband's secrets for money, and then to leave him ! ”

“That was not meant,” urged her daughter-in-law, gently. “She did not mean to leave him. Mrs. Seymour went too. We have not the worst to face, thank God. I can never be too thankful that Dorset found that out in time. It is noble of William to put the country before himself, and I am so thankful that Dorset is proud of his brother, and we have not to mourn over his wrecked life ; but he suffers dreadfully, dear mother, he suffers dreadfully, and he will never rest until he has found her and learned from her own lips what she meant by her crime. If only he would not blame himself so bitterly, I think I could bear it better.”

“Blame himself,” exclaimed the Duchess, “and for what ? Because his patience and love and care were not enough for a girl he had rescued from penury and the dead-alive existence of a country parsonage. Because

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he would not allow her to emulate the women who are the curse of the age, who are never happy unless they are steeped in excitement, who marry to emancipate themselves from the last rag of decency a girl is obliged to wear or be ostracised, but which a matron, a possible mother of our future race, may cast off, and be applauded for so doing ; who shoot and bet, gamble and horse-race, with the men ; who crop their heads and wear boys' hats and men's clothes, and who have reverence for neither God nor man. For this, for this, because he would not let her bear-fight and struggle with the rest, she has left him, and we are to stand by and see him grieve. He shall not. Wretched, miserable, degrading as is divorce, I trust he may yet obtain one ; for only think what he might be yet with a good woman at his heart and a real helpmate beside him, if he has done so much with only Jacinth Merridew as his incentive for action ;" and the Duchess clasped her hands, and looked down at her daughter-in-law for approbation.

The gentle little Duchess trembled before her mother as a rule, but this evening she would not allow herself to dread her stern words and sterner looks. She took her hand in hers and whispered, "I don't want you to urge William to leave Jacinth and take another wife. Don't be angry," she added, tremulously ; "but we, of all people, must not encourage this easy loosening of a bond that is for life, for richer, for poorer ; for better, for worse. I think all Jacinth has done she has done from fright. She owed money ; William kept all the money, and she could get none. She was tempted, she hated the bill ; she would have stopped it all if she could ; this seemed an easy way out of her bother. I know all about her bills now, and I don't wonder she was maddened. She has been foolish, but, oh ! not wicked enough to be thrust out into darkness. After a while she must be forgiven and taken home," and the Duchess kissed her mother-in-law's hands, and cried more than ever.

"Do you remember your own daughters?"



asked her mother, sternly. "You are the mother of girls. If you condone Jacinth's sin, how can you look them in the face?"

"It is because of them I am pleading for poor Jacinth," replied the Duchess. "They may one day need someone to plead for them. When one has children, one is very merciful to other people. One never knows; how can we tell they will never be tempted and fall? If we have sneered and scoffed at every sinner, someone will sneer and scoff at our children; but if we have helped them to repentance, who knows but someone may do the same for us. They may never need it. I pray God they may never sin, but as long as human nature exists there is always the chance, and, in consequence, I am very tender to those who have been tempted. I never was, thank Heaven," she added, naively. "I have been always loved and shielded in my dear home, but I might have been, and then, and then——" and once more she buried her head in the Duchess's lap.

The stern look faded from the Duchess's

eyes ; she stroked the little hand quietly, and then said gently : “ We will not discuss the matter any more now, and will try and think of something else, until after to-night, at least. I am thankful no one knows what has happened. Parsons quite believes in Jacinth’s absence at Bevercombe, and William’s attitude has disarmed the gossips of the society papers. Once to-night is over, once his speech is made, and the bill before the House, we shall have time to think. To have carried him over such days as Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday have been is a triumph, and if only to-night goes well, we shall, perhaps, after a while, be able to forgive if we cannot forget. Oh ! how slowly the night goes when one is waiting for news ; how it gallops when we would fain keep time by us, and make him stay. These night watches remind me of your babies, dearest. I never seem to have had to stay up except when some new little life is struggling into this weary world.”

“ A grand new life for England is being born to-night,” answered her daughter-in-law,

brightly. How we struggled against it at first, didn't we? How we clung to all the restrictions, all the old bonds; but if we can see the land enfranchised, the farms worked again, and landowners living among their own people, and the dear country saved, we shall look back on this night with joy indeed; and to think that William's hand may have directed this."

The elder Duchess looked down at her daughter-in-law, but did not speak. She could not; her heart was with her son. She wondered how he would bear himself; how he would get through the night's work.

The hours passed slowly. The little Duchess had fallen asleep; the silver clock struck three. Could anything have happened? The Duchess rose to her feet, and drew up the blind and looked out. The night was very still—an ideal May night, and presently, far away, she heard the rapid trot of the horses; she opened the door and stole out. The watchful man-servant had heard the carriage too, and was at the door. It would

not do to receive the news before him. She went back into the room, and stood holding the back of the chair tightly. Presently she heard voices ; she knew by this time things had gone well ; her heart beat wildly, and then the Duke rushed upstairs. "Such a triumph," he began ; "the House rose at him. Oh ! mother, if you had only been there."

"Where is he ?" whispered the Duchess. The Duke looked round and rushed down the stairs again, followed by his mother.

"His Lordship went into the library," said the man, opening the door for his master, who, pushing by him rapidly, was just in time to catch his brother in his arms, as he was in the act of falling forward on the table in a dead faint. The strain, the magnificent effect of the speech, the applause abroad, the desolation at home, had been too much for him, and, before morning, Lord William lay in his bed, surrounded by nurses and doctors, supremely unconscious of all that had happened, or was happening around him at the present moment.

## CHAPTER VI.

## AGAINST THE TIDE.

THE whole of that feverish night Jacinth never slept ; she paced the floor of her dingy bedroom, with her hands tightly clasped and her head hanging down, wondering wondering, what she could do. Money must be had in some way ; she must live, and she must take steps at once to procure enough to carry her over the present. Perhaps, as her husband was so callous about her, it would be safe for her to send for another cheque-book and draw out the small amount which stood to her credit in the Barford Bank. Then she recollected with a warm flush of shame whose money it was. No, she could never touch that ; she must earn something, somehow.

Never, until that moment, had Jacinth realized how utterly helpless is a woman alone in

London, without money, without friends, without shelter. She wondered drearily what she should do when the morning came, and she was obliged to come to some decision. Ah ! when the morning came the papers would be out, and she would be able to see for herself if Lord William had really spoken, and if her eyes had not been deceived when she had driven past the House the evening before. He could not have acquiesced so calmly in her loss, as this would prove him to have done. He could not be so utterly unfeeling as to go on with the work of his life, though his wife had gone out of it.

Only that day last week she had believed herself absolutely necessary to her husband's happiness. Now, if he had really carried out his plans, she would know that she was as absolutely indifferent to him, and she laughed bitterly to herself as she thought what a small thing was man's affection, and how brief was the love which Lord William had often sworn would last beyond life itself, and only be perfected on the other side of the grave.

So outrageous did his unfeeling conduct appear to Jacinth that she almost lost consciousness of her own misdeeds in the contemplation of her husband's callousness. She was sure now he had never loved her, sure that he had delighted to tyrannise over her and condemn her to a life she loathed in order to show his power ; but she would assert herself, she would not starve to please him, and she would go back to Windyholme and wait for him to come to her there, and turn her out of the house if he dare.

One after the other, plans for her future flitted through her brain. She had, of course, lost all hold over the *Wasp*; even if she could have written for it now she was outside the pale of news which had rendered her contributions so valuable. Could she face Barford and Windyholme? No; rather than that, would she return to the stool in the hated office she had vacated when Bob went to Bevercombe. She would employ her talent for decoration in the service of the firm she had so loathed, and keep herself without

applying to those who were evidently so pleased to be rid of her that they could go on their way, pursuing their usual avocations, without making the least attempt to rescue her from what she supposed they must be thinking was a life of shame.

The idea of the stool in the office grew upon Lady William. She had employed one of the principals of the firm to do some work at Windyholme. She knew his wife just a little, and had often been amused at her evident joy at being on speaking terms with the daughter-in-law of a Duchess, and her as evident desire that Lady William should not perceive that she was not accustomed to similar society every day of her life. She would go and call on her the very next afternoon, and would broach the subject of employment to her. At all events that would be something to do ; and then there were the morning's papers to look at. She must see if her husband had really made his speech and introduced his bill. As she thought of this, Jacinth pressed her hands to her aching



head and wondered drearily if ever anyone had ever been so wretched or so deceived before. The sleepless nights, the anxiety, the trouble, all seemed to overwhelm her at once, and despite her misery she lay down on the sofa in her room, and was soon asleep, dreaming fitfully and wretchedly over and over again, the events of the last few days.

The morning was some hours old when she awoke and remembered all that was before her. She started up and looked at herself in the glass; her face was haggard and tired, her eyes sunken; all her brilliant self seemed hidden behind a mask. She smiled bitterly as she thought how changed all was, how different her life must now be; after all, she had cast away her happiness herself, with both hands; she had no one but herself to thank for the *fiasco* she had made of her life.

She looked at her watch: it was past ten; there were the papers to read, her breakfast to see about, a hundred trivial things to settle; still, there would be time to read the

papers while she had her breakfast. She rang the bell, and ordered the chambermaid to bring her copies of all that were in the hotel, and her breakfast, at the same time, and then, wandering about the room with clasped hands, she began the same miserable chain of thought interrupted last night.

When the maid brought the papers Jacinth seized them hurriedly ; yes, there it was, in enormous letters, "Remarkable Speech of Lord William Petersfield. Elaborate Plan for the Enfranchisement of the Land. Compulsory Sale or Compulsory Culture. Absentee Landlordism. The Decay of Country Life." One after the other, all the familiar head-lines caught her eye, and for a moment she sat speechless, regarding the paper, which was clutched tightly in her hand.

He had actually silently given her up. Here was the speech, careful, scholarly, replete with common-sense, and full of suggestion ; here the graphic picture of the wind-swept heights of Fulbrook : desolate, empty, given over to game, and bereft of

everything that makes life possible for the agricultural labourer ; and then the contrast of the industrial village, with its centre of usefulness, its spade-husbandry, its small gardens, its absolute ability to pay its own way, its perfect demonstration that the country life could be restored did each owner of land recognise his position as steward, instead of insisting on his right to depopulate the country, to riot in London, to neglect his homestead and his own people ; a right that should never be allowed for one moment to exist once it was shown that it was exercised for the benefit of the few and the misery of the many.

One after the other the familiar arguments were repeated, but repeated so lucidly, so clearly, that none could refuse to see how right Lord William was in the scheme he had evolved. As long as the land was cultivated and made to do the best it could for the world at large, the legislature would not interfere, but directly farms went out of cultivation the Government would be

entitled to investigate the cause, and to insist on compulsory sale at a fair price, should the owner refuse or be unable to use the land himself to the best advantage ; but above all did Lord William urge on each owner to himself see the signs of the times, and to save himself and the country from the doom that must overwhelm them, unless they were prepared to face the crisis and to recognise for themselves the abyss, on the brink of which they were undoubtedly standing.

There was no doubt British wheat farming had seen its day, and the chimera of "fair trade" was a dream that must be dispelled before the dawn of common sense ; as much would they resort to closed ports to save the landed interest as they would resort to tallow candles because gas had ruined the chandlers, or to old-fashioned stage coaches because the post-boys were thrown out of employment and big hotels closed by the introduction of steam. The farmers as wheat-producers were ruined, but dear wheat meant starvation to millions, and would never be

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allowed again for one moment ; a duty-import would cause a revolution ; but there were other means before the farmers, another future before the landowners, if they would only cast away their prejudices, their love of luxury, and band together to do their best for the famishing country. Much that had been impossible was rendered more than possible by the spread of education, and now that the daughters of the country townsfolk were as well educated as the darlings of the county, when dukes were in trade, and marquises sold coal, it was time for all artificial barriers to be broken down, and county and town must amalgamate and work together to do away with the dulness which was one of the greatest barriers to the success of a country life. Then they would recognise how much the land could yet be made to do ; it was no use to scoff at the great statesmen who had suggested small industries, for on these small industries they must rely ; the spade would yet do good work, and would accomplish what nothing else would do now.

As Jacinth eagerly scanned the whole long speech, the elaborate plans for the release of the land from the bonds of centuries, and the statistics carefully compiled about the profits to be made from similar villages to that of Windyholme, she almost forgot her passionate resentment against her husband, but when she had finished and glanced through some of the leaders on the subject, in which Lord William was alternately lauded as the saviour of his country and denounced as a revolutionist of the worst type, according to the politics of the special journal before her, she once more realized that this brilliant speaker was a man about whose ears the whole fabric of his home had fallen ; whose wife had left him, presumably for another ; and whose whole domestic future had but that moment been utterly and entirely spoiled ; and that without one regret, one qualm, he could let his wife fade utterly out of his life without a struggle, while he thought of nothing save his own plans, his own career. It was too much, too outrageous. He could

not have felt her loss as much as she had done that of one of her dogs which had died ; he had let her go, and here she was stranded before her life was well begun, without a friend, without money, without a home.

Should she write to Bob, and tell him exactly how things were with her? Should she go down to Bob, and beg Barbara to save her from herself, and give her shelter until she could make her living? Common sense urged 'Yes'; pride, self-will and obstinacy as emphatically said 'No'. She could have gone home, she could have confessed her fault, and proved her innocence of the worst of all, had her husband shown in the smallest degree that he felt her absence ; as it was, she would live for herself alone and make a living somehow. After all, there was always the workhouse to fall back upon.

Jacinth called for the bill, paid it, and, depositing her luggage at Euston Station, set out on her dreary hunt for a room which should be within her means. The absolute squalor and hideousness of the Euston Road

struck her more forcibly than ever, but she would be perfectly safe there, and noting where the fly-blown cards were nailed to blackened plane trees to announce where rooms were to let, she went from one wretched place to another, until she secured a square clean chamber at the top of the house, from whence she looked down into the trees in the front of the terrace, and wondered how foul a thing could be May in an unfashionable part of London. May, actually May, when everything is becoming bright and lovely, when the squares are redolent of lilac and golden with laburnum, and the days were as full as they could hold of everything delightful ; and here was the Euston Road, and nothing whatever to do, save to search for employment, and to discover some place where food could be bought cheaply and satisfactorily.

By the time Jacinth had settled on her room, and had her boxes fetched, those very new boxes, of the contents of which she was yet ignorant, it was nearly four o'clock ;



time enough to see Mrs. Hogg, who resided in the unfashionable Russell Square, kept there by her husband's common-sense dislike to small houses, much against her will, and who, therefore, was within easy reach. She had determined to take the bull by the horns, and presented herself at the door, resolutely determined to tell the truth, at least about her parting with her husband, and to ask Mrs. Hogg straight out about her chances of employment at the works. The servant knew her, and at once took her into Mrs. Hogg's own little room, where she was seated over her solitary tea-table. Mrs. Hogg was an extremely quiet little woman, with excellent manners, but with the ingrained dread of the shop that is the outcome of centuries of disdain of trade. Unfortunately for her, her father had been a small country doctor, whose struggles to make both ends meet had been most heroic, and who had been thankful indeed when the rich manufacturer fell in love with his eldest hope, and so not only provided for her, but helped the rest of

the family materially, by placing the chances of occupation within their reach. But the odour of sanctity, represented by profession, was never forgotten by Mrs. Hogg, and, whenever she could, she alluded to her relatives in a manner calculated to enrage her husband, but which, somehow or other, extracted from him nothing save an unmistakeable chuckle; and as she was always expecting her claims to be recognised, she had not been in the least astonished at the manner in which Lady William had befriended her, and made her in some measure a confidante, if only about her chairs and tables, yet most certainly a confidante.

She looked up brightly as Jacinth entered the room, and rose quickly from her chair. "How kind of you to come and see me, Lady William," she exclaimed. "I was just wondering if I might write and congratulate you, and now I can do so in person. Mr. Hogg is quite wild about his Lordship's speech; he has bought every paper to read at the office, and vows that England ought to

give him a statue. How proud you must be of him! I do envy you. But you look tired; let me find you the most comfortable chair in the room, and give you some tea. No doubt you sat up late last night to wait for the news," and, fussing about, Mrs. Hogg put Jacinth into a low chair, and gave her her tea before she could say a word, while Jacinth, knowing Mrs. Hogg was an inveterate reader of society papers, and would have been fully aware of any scandal about her, had her story become public property, allowed herself to be petted and made much of, thinking drearily at the same time about her room in the Euston Road, and how little Mrs. Hogg would envy her, or even care about her, as soon as she had learned how matters really stood.

At first it was so pleasant to sit there listening to Mrs. Hogg's raptures, that she had almost made up her mind to accept her homage and leave her in ignorance of the real object of her visit; but as Mrs. Hogg continued to talk about nothing but the bill,

she felt at last that she must desperately break into her rhapsodies about Lord William, and tell her at once how matters stood; the great difficulty, after all, was to relate her story without making herself out too great a sinner. Silly as Mrs. Hogg was, she was, undoubtedly, loyal to her own husband, shop and all; she was of the great middle class, and had all the middle-class horror of a scandal, and should she hear the plain unvarnished truth would undoubtedly shrink from Lady William as much as at present she was, what school-boys would call, "making up to her."

But presently she interrupted Mrs. Hogg's flow of eloquence by saying, "You forget my Conservative prejudices, Mrs. Hogg."

"No, I do not, Lady William," replied Mrs. Hogg, smiling, "but most of the Conservatives have gone over to your husband's side. Things have become so serious that they see something must be done, and as the Duke agrees with Lord William I suppose you do, too. Surely you, too, sink all

political differences, and are ready to help the country to the best of your power?"

"I am afraid I don't care in the very least for the country," said Jacinth, bitterly; "the country has never done anything for me, save bore me to death, and, in consequence, I have not the smallest affection for it, and don't care what becomes of it in the very least. But, Mrs. Hogg, I have a confession to make to you. This very bill that you admire so much has broken up my home. No! please don't interrupt me," she added, as Mrs. Hogg jumped up from her chair, and seemed about to speak. "Now I have my courage up, and have broken the ice, let me finish my story. I have left my husband; I cannot live with him any longer; and I came to you to see if Mr. Hogg would give me some work in the office. I am sure I could earn enough to keep me there, if he could take me in, and I really don't know what I shall do if he can't. Will you speak to him for me, dear Mrs. Hogg, and let me know, to that address, if he can help me?" And rising from her chair, and

drawing closer her veil, Lady William put a card on the tea table on which she had hastily scribbled her Euston Road address, and was about to leave the room, when Mrs. Hogg threw her arms round her impulsively, and drew her down on the sofa by her side, when the silly little woman burst into tears, and wept for quite ten minutes before she could answer Jacinth.

At last she said, "It can't be true, dear Lady William, or, if it should be, at all events do make it up. Think of your husband, what a man he is, and what he must be thinking of all his time, and don't quarrel with him because, perhaps, he hasn't been so kind to you as he might have been. I don't know anything of public men, but if my husband had distinguished himself as yours has done, I'd black his boots cheerfully, if he'd like me to, and, what's more, he should walk over me with them, if it gave him the least pleasure. Geniuses always are hard to live with, but, after all, think what he is! Why, some day that young man may be Prime Minister, and

you will be his wife; nothing can alter that. Please don't think me presuming, dear Lady William," she added, "but nothing should come between a husband and his wife; and do, do let me beg of you to forgive him and go back to him."

"It is impossible, dear Mrs. Hogg," replied Jacinth, quietly. "I only wish I could; I only wish I dare. It is hardly Lord William's fault; he didn't understand me or care for me. I was impetuous, and did very very wrong, so wrong that he will never forgive me. All I want now is never to trouble him again; and if you and your dear husband will give me some work, I can assure you I shall never cease to be grateful to you, believe me that; but work I must have, or I shall starve, and that would be worst of all. I only wish I could tell you all the story, but I can't; only believe me that I never meant to do wrong, that I have done nothing that makes me unfit for society. Although I have been foolish, and worse than foolish, where my husband was concerned, my only comfort is

that my loss has not made the very smallest difference to him. Now let me go; tell Mr. Hogg what I came to ask you; and don't leave me long in suspense," she added, smiling sadly, "for unless I have work soon, I shall not be able to have any dinner, and that would be dreadful, wouldn't it?" And, shaking hands with Mrs. Hogg, Jacinth left the Russell Square house, and soon found herself in her dingy room, with the evening before her to fill in the best manner she could, the while she wondered if she should feel more completely cut off from her own old world, if she were actually dead, than she did at the moment, in a room too squalid for her own maid to inhabit without murmuring considerably, and in her state of absolute ignorance as to what her husband was doing, or what had happened in her familiar circle both in London and Windyholme.

It was a curious sensation to feel that she was within a shilling cab fare of Dorset House, yet was as utterly unable to drive there to demand an entrance, to even ask



for her own belongings, as if she lay in her coffin, or was put away in the family vault at Stradfield; and she began to feel that she must have changed her entire identity, and have become some one else, as much as if she had died and commenced another existence in another world, when the necessity of providing herself with food took her again out of doors, and passed for her a few more minutes of what appeared to be an absolutely endless day.

In the meantime Mrs. Hogg was eagerly telling her husband of the visit of the afternoon. "I never saw any one so changed," she said, "and I am sure if you can't help her, John, she'll do something desperate."

"Not she," replied her husband, easily. "There has been a worse tiff than usual, that's all. I never had much opinion of her Ladyship. I never told you, Mary, but we had the pleasure of her company in the office before, and I can assure you it's an experience I don't much care to repeat. If that good brother of hers hadn't taken her in hand I

should have sent her off long before she went; but I could always rely on him. What she cost me in ledgers, to say nothing of the customers she insulted, no tongue can tell, and will never bear thinking of. But now it is a different matter altogether. This, then, accounts, no doubt, for Lord William's illness," and Mr. Hogg threw his copy of the *St. James's Gazette* into his wife's lap as he spoke.

"He isn't very bad, is he?" she asked, anxiously scanning the paper.

"No, not very. I came round by his house on purpose on my way home to ask for him," replied her husband. "A sharpish attack of feverish collapse, caused by overwork, and accentuated, no doubt, though they didn't say so, by the behaviour of that wife of his. However, I shall go round and see the Duchess presently, if she can see me, that is, and tell her of my Lady's application. I don't employ her without the family's consent, and we may be quite sure the fad won't last long. I can keep her in the inner office until such time as she comes to her senses,

and she will be none the worse for a little of the Euston Road, in May too, of all months of the year. Think of that, Mary, and recollect the sketches I did for the Windyholme house, where nothing I could suggest was original enough for her Ladyship. She'll find little save original dirt and original sin in her present abode, and, if I know anything of her, the sheer hideousness and squalor of her surroundings will do more to bring her to her senses than anything else. If the family ask my humble opinion, I shall advise them to leave her studiously alone until she goes to them and begs their pardon. But if I am to see the Duchess before writing to Lady William, I think I had better set off before dinner. Don't wait for me though, Mary, for I may have to see her Ladyship afterwards, and I want to feel I am not keeping you," and, so saying, Mr. Hogg ran downstairs and was soon seated in the library at Dorset House, waiting to see if his card inscribed "on urgent business" would procure for him the interview he was anxious to

obtain. He had not to wait long in suspense. The Duchess had remembered Jacinth's dealings with his firm, and she wondered if it could be an application for money ; anyhow, she must save William any trouble. On the securing for him of a few hours' absolute quiet and absence of worry hung all the chances of recovery without the attack of brain fever the doctor apprehended, and, fearing that Mr. Hogg might be an importunate creditor on Jacinth's account, she came into the room with her haughtiest expression on her face and her cheque-book in her hand.

Mr. Hogg noticed both with the quick eyes of a man accustomed to take in and use everything he saw. "It is not money, your Grace ; his Lordship owes me nothing. I am come to tell you of a singular application made to me this afternoon, and which I cannot entertain unless I have your permission to do so."

"Pray be seated, Mr. Hogg," said the Duchess, graciously. "I must, however, ask you to be brief ; Lord William is ill, and I

do not like to leave him for more than a few minutes. Last night's brilliant triumph will have been dearly bought if he has to pay for it with a serious illness, and I should not have seen you if you had not mentioned urgent family affairs."

"I will be as brief as I possibly can," answered Mr. Hogg. "I have, or rather my wife has had, a visit from Lady William Petersfield this afternoon, and I thought your Grace should at once know of this. She has taken a room in the Euston Road, and has applied to me for employment. Naturally, my thoughts turned to your Grace, and, if I can say so without offence, may I add that I place my services at your disposal unreservedly."

The Duchess looked fixedly at Mr. Hogg. She was a great believer in physiognomy, and believed any man or woman carried his or her character plainly engraved on their countenances for all to read—all who had sense enough to do so. She saw that in Mr. Hogg's face which inclined her to trust him. "Mr. Hogg," she replied, "I will not conceal

from you that at present it is not well for Lady William to return here and meet her husband. She has been a wilful woman, and she has, we have reason to believe, done him what might have been a great injury. That it was not, that the blow missed its mark, was not in any measure due to her. Under these circumstances, I consider it best that she should be allowed to live her own life, and believe that we have all cast her off. As soon as my dear son can bear the news, I will tell him where she is, and the help you are prepared to give her, and leave it to him to determine how long the punishment must last. There are some people," she added, sadly, "who have to have their happiness taken from them to appreciate it, and I much fear Lady William is one of them. You say you can really employ her? Of course, any money you may require is at your service."

"I shall not require any, thank your Grace," answered Mr. Hogg. "Lady William's taste will be of considerable use to me in my business, and I do not suppose you wish her

to think she is worth more than she is? I will take care that no one sees her, or learns where she is, and you can rely on Mrs. Hogg doing all she can for her. Believe me, that your Grace trusts me is a great honour, and I will see that her ladyship has all the consideration due to her rank. I think, from what my wife tells me, she is already beginning to be sorry for her position."

"It is very sad," said the Duchess, quietly; "but I feel convinced things will be brighter soon, and if you can help us, Mr. Hogg, we shall feel very grateful. It is a great relief to know all is well with her, and now the bill is before the House we shall have time to think. Will you try and come and see me again after Lady William is with you, and let me hear how all goes on? Of course, I rely on you not to let her know you have seen me; and I do not wish her to hear of her husband's illness, more especially now, when, if all goes well, he will be quite himself in a few days: but I must not leave him longer. Please believe I am very grateful to you,"

and holding out her hand, for the first time in her life the Dowager Duchess of Dorset shook hands with an absolute tradesman, and really was none the worse for the operation.

As Mr. Hogg turned his steps towards the Euston Road, he meditated profoundly on the wonderful manner in which the world was changing. He doubted much if his good old father, who had made the business, and was as upright and honourable a man as ever lived, had ever seen a Duchess, much less spoken to one; and he could not help smiling at the idea of a Duke's sister-in-law asking for a stool in the office, albeit it was one she had already occupied before she had reached her present exalted station; and when he recollected the estimation in which trade was held, not twenty years ago, when he remembered the difference there used to be in the educational status of a tradesman and a peer, and recollected that his eldest boy and the son of a Duke were in the same form at Harrow and great pals; while he had



discovered the board-school taught under-nurse helping his second boy with a tough sum in compound fractions that had utterly floored both his mother and the superior governess, he wondered much what the next generation would be like, and whether by then there would be any distinction at all between the classes ; except that one ineradicable one that would always exist between those who are educated and those who at present have been taught nothing except the best way of stealing what they all resolutely refused to work for ; the class that the howling socialist fosters with promises, as false as they are foolish and absurd. The bloody revolution which had been the salvation of France, that had been prophesied for England, and that was rendered impossible by the spread of learning, would receive its final *coup-de-grace* by the passing of Lord William's bill ; and while Mr. Hogg meditated on the industrial village he could support from his immense manufactories at present crammed into a corner of London because no land was available for

his purpose near town, his thoughts went once more back to Lord William's bill, and his enthusiastic admiration for Lord William rose again, as he pondered on the measure that must free the land, and give it to some extent back again to those from whom it had been stolen wrongfully in bygone years.

An absolute believer in work of all kinds, Mr. Hogg had never had any patience with the drones of the universe. His peculiar business brought him into contact with luxurious women who would squander thousands to ensure perfection of decoration and absolute softness and beauty of surroundings, and he had an immense store of contempt for them ; and when he pondered on Lady William and the imbecile position in which she had placed herself, he felt little inclined to mount the dingy staircase before him, that seemed almost in his face, as the even dingier front door was opened to him by a small maid, whose appearance was singularly appropriate to her situation, and whose acquaintance with the

wash-tub must have been of an extremely distant nature.

Mr. Hogg could not help smiling to himself as he remembered the wide, beautiful Windyholme staircase and the spacious hall; and when he reflected on Lord William's position, his illness, and the marvellous measure which was in everyone's mouth, and the topic of all the papers, Liberal and Conservative alike, he vowed to himself that if her ladyship chose to row against the tide in her own boat, she should find the struggle a hard one; and when he opened the door, after knocking at it, and saw her seated in the window, gazing down into the plane tree which stood in front of the house, he went forward, determined to make his bargain a hard one, and to give her no more than he would have felt inclined to do were she one of his ordinary hands, even suggesting she should retain her present room, as its situation would allow her to remain unseen by her husband's family; the while it would allow her, by aid of the Underground, to reach the

place of business, which Mr. Hogg was not ashamed to call a shop, with as little delay as possible.

That she acquiesced quietly in all his arrangements ; that she looked pale, worn, and absolutely cowed and wretched, did not alter his determination in the least, and when he left her to return home, he did so more than ever sympathising with Lord William, and more than ever determined that it should not be his fault if husband and wife were not soon re-united ; though, as he added to his wife in the seclusion of their chamber, what any man could want to hamper himself with such a selfish animal as her ladyship was passed his comprehension ; and he really thought he should be doing Lord William the greatest kindness, if he made Jacinth so comfortable that she spent the rest of her life in his service, among the chairs and tables and silks and satins, to which she had been so devoted.

## CHAPTER VII.

## AT BEVERCOMBE ONCE MORE.

IN the ghastly seclusion of the Euston Road, Jacinth was as much separated from her former existence as if she had put the seas between herself and her husband and home.

The months slowly passed away ; May broadened into June, June melted into July, July into August, and August only came to be quickly merged into autumn ; and through it all, Jacinth went from her room to her work, and from her work back again to her room, until she began to wonder mechanically if she had ever done anything else in all her life before. Much as she had hated her desk in the days when she had Bob and Barbara to fall back upon ; when a tea or a dinner at Issy's broke up the monotony of her existence, even

if it did nothing else; and when she could look forward to emancipation in some way or other, either through her own exertions or through those of her brother, the hatred she felt then, was as nothing to that which filled her very soul, and seemed to enwrap her as with a garment, now, as it appeared to her, there was never the smallest chance of her being anything, save a mere drudge in Mr. Hogg's office; where she could not avoid seeing and acknowledging to herself she did little enough to earn the salary that was all that stood between her and complete destitution.

The first few days after she had broken loose from all the ties of home were days of absolute misery and wretchedness; and of such an amount of self-abasement, that Jacinth could never think of them without horror. She had eagerly scanned the newspapers for news of the search for herself that she felt must be going on, but with no success. She had seen a mention of Lord William's illness and his rapid recovery; of the passing of his bill through both houses, and the great

increase in the interest in the village at Windyholme, in consequence of the success that had attended its development; she noted with jealous eye how the barren hill-side settlement had been eagerly visited by the highest in the land, but through it all there was absolute silence as regarded herself; there was no more mention of her name than if she had never existed.

To be entirely let alone, to be ignored, to be forgotten, to be allowed to pass out of her husband's life as if she had never entered it! Could any punishment be more severe, any suffering more terrible?

If he had sought her out and solemnly cast her off with cruel hands; if he had placed her conduct before her in the light in which, alas! she now regarded it herself; if he had divorced her and punished her openly, as she all too sadly knew that she ought to be punished, she thought at times she could have borne it.

It would have been something to know that she had made a mark on Lord William's life;

but now! she was less to him than the maid she had once discharged for stealing her lace was to her; less than the secretary who wrote his letters; the foreman of the factory that was making Fulbrook famous, and Windyholme the mark for the eyes of the whole of England; and as she sat, sometimes, in her dreary room in that dreary street, her head resting on her hands, and her eyes filled with tears, she could not help thinking that her punishment was more than she could bear, and that she must, at any cost, see her husband again, and break the dreadful silence that had enwrapped her as completely as if she had died, and the dark passage of the grave lay between them.

Jacinth would gaze at the ring on her wedding finger, and at times wonder if it really did belong to her. She had not one thing left beside this to remind her of who she once was; and as she looked at it, twisting it round and round her finger, she recollected every incident of her wedding day, every word Lord William had spoken, every tender



touch and loving whisper which had then rather irked her, and made her remember angrily how much more she would have felt had another than her husband been beside her, and had her old love been in the place that Lord William was to occupy ; and now what would she have given to feel those strong cool hands enfold her own again, that welcome voice in her ear whispering that she was forgiven !

It seemed, after all, so unfair. The *Wasp* continued to flourish under Mr. Seymour's guidance. Jacinth could tell that from the posters, though she could not now afford the necessary sixpence for the paper itself. Great laughter had been raised over the spurious bill. A species of burlesque of the true one had been published in the next week's paper by "permission of the able author," and the storm in the tea-cup was over, having wrecked no one but Jacinth, and resulting, by some lucky stroke, in making the *Wasp* more popular than ever, and the clever editor universally in request at all fashionable gatherings ; where

he and his wife were always seen together, and where the slight suspicion that he knew more than he chose to say about Lady William's disappearance only gave his career more interest to those whose lives are spent in regarding the doings and sayings of people whose names are known, and who, being of no earthly interest, and having no powers of work or concentration themselves, spend their existences in looking on at those who make up the petty history of every day, and in talking about them, until the veriest literary scrub whose name appears in print is of some absorbing interest in some clique or other.

How Jacinth escaped the comments with which she knew the women who compose the outer fringe of journalism were bubbling over she could not conceive. For the first few weeks of her exile she had read every single paper that came out, but beyond an evidently inspired paragraph, which stated that the recent strain on her mind had enforced her to spend the summer abroad in the care of one of the Duchess's sisters, as Lord William's duties

at home would not allow him to accompany her, there was not one mention of her name ; and she often wearily sat doing nothing, save gaze into the fire thinking, thinking, of Windyholme and the luxurious rest and peace she had thrown away so lavishly, and at which she had so often girded when they were in her possession.

To be left alone ! To whom now did it matter if she did not sleep, if she rose in the night and clasped her hands on her aching heart and sobbed for very misery and loneliness ? Who cared in the least if her head ached until she could hardly see the monotonous pages of that hated ledger ; or until papers, cretonnes, or hangings were all merged in one dismal hue seen through a mist of tears ? Mr. Hogg would probably impatiently call her attention to the manner in which she had sorted patterns to be sent by post : he would most likely hand her work over to someone else, with a sarcastic reference to her well-known taste and powers of arrangement ; but there was no one now to darken the

room, to anxiously await the doctor's assurance that there was nothing really the matter, and that a few hours' sleep and a little care would soon restore her ladyship to her usual condition. Not that there was any doctor called in to give such an assurance. Jacinth could not have afforded such a rash proceeding as the incurrence of a bill for medicine and attendance; neither did she require such attendance; but she often thought of the despised Barford doctor, and longed for his genial countenance and the pleasant manner in which he treated those small miseries, which as often as not give way to a few jovial sentences; and are as much relieved by a doctor's manner as by any amount of physic but are as real as true maladies, albeit they spring only from a woman's imagination.

Sometimes, after a specially wretched night, Jacinth would make up her mind to go home at all hazards. She would feverishly pack her small belongings and think over the trains to Barford, and the amount of time it would take to reach Waterloo; but then she would

recollect, with a sickening sensation of abject dread, how even the Barford porters and station master would look at her and her shabby bag; and how the gossips would gloat over every item of the description the men would give of how she arrived, what she said, how she looked, and finally, how she had started off forlornly to walk the seven miles between the station and Bevercombe Rectory; and blushing as warmly in her dull and dingy chamber as she would have done at the station had she ever found courage to face comment there, she would throw down her valise, and set off from Gower Street station as usual on her way to the daily work, feeling absolutely powerless to again bridge over the distance that lay between her and the old life.

The silence seemed to paralyse her; to have no letters, to have no one to speak to, not one soul with whom to exchange familiar converse: could any fate be worse?

Mr. Hogg, prudently looking forward to the time when Lady William would be thankful to have no one to remind her of

this, the most dreadful part of her life, had requested his wife to keep away from the Euston Road, and had nothing but the severest business relations with his employée. Still, he silently watched her for all that, and in the weekly reports that went every Sunday from the house in Russell Square to Lord William; breaking his heart amidst all his work at Windyholme; he never omitted to state how Jacinth looked, and whether he thought she was well, or otherwise; but Jacinth knew nothing of this, and looked upon Mrs. Hogg in the light of a fair weather acquaintance, to be forgotten with the rest of her old life.

The landlady, over-worked and "done to death," as she expressed it, had very little time to talk to her lodgers, even had Jacinth desired her to do so; and, in consequence, her life was an entirely silent one, and her days were void of all that could in any way cause her to forget her dismal present, her still more dismal future, which seemed bounded by the Euston Road on one side, and on the other

by that dismal counting house, reached daily at 9 a.m. by the means of the still more dismal Underground Railway.

In the beginning of November Jacinth caught cold; not a serious cold, nor one that would end in a dramatic attack of congestion of the lungs, and the still more dramatic death-bed scene to which she was always mentally looking forward; but a disagreeable, miserable cold for all that, which seized her mentally and bodily, and disclosed to her depths of wretchedness beyond those deeps which she had until that moment deemed unsurpassable.

It was a time of real yellow fog : fog that got into one's throat and choked one, that made the little lodging-house maid "drat the blacks" more than ever, and that caused life to appear as a species of curious nightmare, in which there was no day, no sun, no hope, nothing but darkness and silence, and general disorganisation of ordinary daily life; and as Jacinth crawled from her room to the underground station, and back again from

the office to her room, she felt as if the last straw was placed on her already overburdened shoulders, and that, come what might, she must creep back to the blue skies, cold fresh air, and running water of Dorsetshire. Yes; even if all the inhabitants at Barford stood in a row pointing the finger of scorn at her, and even if Bob turned his back and left her alone in her misery to die on his doorstep!

How she repented herself of her wickedness then no tongue can tell. How she longed for her husband, and how she wearied for his forgiveness, no one could describe; and as one by one her follies and sins recalled themselves to her mind, she marvelled at his patience, and at the love that had lasted even through conduct and ingratitude which would have disgusted a less good and patient man; and for the first time since her marriage she realized what he was, and furthermore what he had expected her to be to him.

What right had she to gird at a life which was Paradise compared to that which he had



taken her from, and if he had neglected her and sacrificed her to the village, was not both the neglect and the sacrifice caused by the friends she had made and the attitude she had taken towards him in the matter? She could only answer these questions in the affirmative. Alas! now that it was too late, Jacinth repented her for everything she had done, and she would have given ten years of her life to have once more the thousand and one opportunities of doing good that had been hers when she stood with Lord William at the altar in Bevercombe Church. But at last she recognized her own selfishness and her frailty, and she wondered, wondered, wondered why Lord William had ever married her.

Suddenly she knew that he had loved her, that through it all his heart had been open to her, aching to let her in; and she as suddenly seemed to understand that there must be something in her worthy of such affection, else surely Lord William would never have made her his wife.

Worthy of his affection ! Could she ever become so ? Could she ever reach him and, despite Barford and the gossips, fall on her knees beside him and beg him to take her home again. After all, he could but spurn her, could but send her back to obscurity and misery ; and she would have seen him again, have touched his hand, have discovered for herself if he were ill or well, or if, after all, he was glad to have ridden himself of her.

How these thoughts dogged her footsteps all that weary week ! How miserable she felt, with her dreadful cough, her ceaseless heart-ache, and her accumulation of both mental and physical discomfort ! Night by night she resolved to go home and face the worst ; but every morning found her resolution vanishing into thin air and her courage gone ; and instead of taking the omnibus to Waterloo and breaking away from the Euston Road and all the concomitant misery thereof, she went wearily to her work through the fog, looking so wretched that Mr. Hogg began to think the time had come to send for the Duchess,

and that unless Lady William were speedily looked after, she would soon require nothing save a corner in the family vault. Indeed, he was just on the point of writing, when something happened that caused Jacinth to suddenly make up her mind to go to Bob and find out for herself the worst that was before her.

One morning the little maid had asked her at breakfast if she might pull down the blind, just for half-an-hour. "You see, mum," she remarked, with the unconscious freedom of a maid-of-all-work, "the next attic to you is going to be buried this morning, and as he hasn't a friend in the world, missus wishes to do the civil to the corpse."

Jacinth looked up hurriedly. "Pull down the blind, by all means," she said. "I am just going out ; but I did not know there had been a death in the house."

"'Taint in this 'ouse," said the maid, glad to exchange a few minutes' conversation with Jacinth, who had the reputation of being "'aughty and decidedly 'igh in her manners"

among the rest of the household ; “ but next door. He were a stuck-up chap, and went to his work regular, but never spoke to a soul. He died quite alone, but left enough to pay the doctor and them as will bury him, but nothink helse ; not a line to say where he were to be put, nor his name, nor nothink ; and if old Mrs. Green wasn’t as honest as honest, the parish could have buried ’im and none the wiser. Now, if ’ad been in this ’ouse—” and Laura winked aggressively at Jacinth, and appeared to insinuate that her mistress’s honesty would have compared unfavourably with that of the lady next door had she been placed in similar circumstances.

“ Do you mean to say the poor man hadn’t a friend ? ” asked Jacinth. “ Some one must have known him, surely ? ”

“ No more nor they knows you,” answered Laura, confidentially. No one calls ’ere for you ; no letters come, neither. He were the same. There’s ’eaps of ’em like it ; but they mostly goes on the parish for their funerals. Now, the next attic is a cut above ’em, and, in

consequence, missus, she wants to pay him the attention of the blinds drawed down, so if you don't hobject, 'ere goes ;" and, so saying, Laura dragged down the dingy yellow blind, and went on her way to do a similar service for the rest of the household.

This was the very last blow to Jacinth's fabric of resistance. The little maid's words struck straight home to her heart. "There's 'eaps like it; no one knows him, more than they knows you; they're mostly buried by the parish."

If she died, the parish would decidedly have the task of burying her. She had not saved five shillings. She wanted far too many things now to allow of her having any prospect of saving for years to come. She would have died and succumbed to the parish long before that; long before she could put by the modest sum an announcement on the blind on a neighbouring window in the Tottenham Court Road told her was the lowest price of a decent funeral. She might as well give up the unequal fight one woman wages against the world.

She would confess her sins to Bob ; dear, indulgent, good Bob. She would go back to Bevercombe, cost her what it might, in mental anguish and abasement, and learn from Bob what chances she had left of ending her life differently to the manner in which she had begun it.

As she determined on this course, she became equally determined to allow herself no time to pause, irresolutely thinking the matter over, and so once more become too cowardly to face her brother and the future ; but on her way to the chest of drawers which contained all her worldly possessions, something impelled her to raise the corner of the blind and gaze for a moment into the dingy street.

As she looked down through the yellow mist and small rain that were filling the air with misery and discomfort, she saw a common black hearse draw up at the next row of steps. Ah ! this was the last act in a tragedy which had happened so close to her that she had often been disturbed at night by the heavy

snoring of her neighbour on the other side of the wall; she remembered now with a shudder how the snoring had been conspicuous by its absence during the last few nights, and she knew in a few miserable seconds exactly what had taken the place of the man who had so often unconsciously annoyed her, and how she had lain on her uneasy couch, with that miserably thin partition only between her and a corpse.

The idea was blood-curdling; her hand grasped the blind for support, and for a few seconds she was too faint to see what was going on; but presently the mist cleared from before her eyes. She noticed a small and grimy crowd of shawled and bonneted women and little errand boys loitering round the door, which presently opened to admit the passage of the miserable *cortège*, and borne on the shoulders of four men came a plain wooden coffin, on the lid of which lay three or four old artificial flowers, no doubt a last token of affection from the landlady for the man who had left enough to bury him

decently, and thus gave her an opportunity of putting the job of his funeral in the way of a friend.

There was absolutely not one soul to follow the unhappy man. Jacinth could see the landlady wiping her eyes on her apron as she watched her lodger's last exit from the house where he had lived unknown and unfriended so long, but she had too much to do to go after it to the cemetery, even had there been sufficient money to pay for a mourning coach; and the coffin was soon inside the hearse and jogging away to its last home, while the one person who had shed a tear over a man who must once have been somebody's dearly-loved child, turned to her daily work, and forgot all about him as soon as she had recovered from the snappishness caused by the extra work of cleaning out the attic and getting it ready for just such another inmate.

The blind fell from Jacinth's hand; she was determined now; she would hesitate no more; she would go home; aye! even if Bob spurned her and Barbara turned her sweet



and tender face another way, she would see Bevercombe once more. She would pray them to give her but a corner in the old churchyard she knew so well. As she feverishly gathered her things together she could not avoid mentally following the course of that wretched, lonely coffin; she could imagine the waxen face, the worn, folded hands on the silent breast; she could almost see the great clod of clay which would presently be carelessly thrown on the coffin, while the shivering clergyman, with his damp surplice fluttering round him, hurried over the service, with which familiarity had made him almost reckless in his delivery of those beautiful words; and then he would turn away, more heavy yellow lumps would be cast in, the grave would be stamped down, and the hearse would rattle back to town, the undertaker's men doubtless jeering over the smallness and insignificance of a job that included no friendly repast in the kitchen, not even so much as an extra glass of beer. And the poor wretch lay under the clods of earth, his

miserable solitary course finished, and his career entirely and utterly over and done with. No doubt once he *had* had a career before him; no doubt he too had had his chances of making a good thing out of his life!

At last Jacinth's things were gathered together, her small hand-bag packed, the rest ready to be sent for should Bob and Barbara prove themselves her true friends; and the room as tidy as such a squalid place ever could be made; and she stood for one moment looking round her, wondering if she would be obliged to recommence her existence there once more, if by to-morrow she would have learned that she was indeed dead to all who had once loved her, and that there was no room for her any more in her old accustomed place, or if she would be taken home again and given one more chance.

There was no use in speculating; already the day was drawing on; it was a long journey to Bevercombe, the afternoons were dark so soon, and there would be that terrible walk over the heath at the end; and with one last

look round, Jacinth went out into the squalid street, and was soon on her way to Waterloo station.

All the journey down she resolutely refused to allow herself to think ; she sat motionless in the corner of the truly dreadful vehicle which the South-Western Railway provides for its third-class passengers, her hands clasped, her teeth clenched, and her whole body fixed and motionless ; her veil was drawn closely over her face, and she trusted to that, the darkness of the Barford station, and her third-class ticket, to carry her past the porters when she reached her destination. Still, as they passed the old familiar land-marks, as they ran over the mud-banks in the harbour, where the gulls were fighting and screaming, and a solitary heron flapped heavily along towards the blue-green fir trees under the hills, Jacinth felt herself trembling all over and her heart beating madly, as she now knew that come what would she must see her brother, and break the six-months' silence which lay between her and their last meeting.

Here was Barford. She could see Carbarrow, and the dull white patch that meant the village settlement and the great convalescent home. She could see the square grey tower of the church, with a flag flying; why, she could not imagine. She could see the low, green walls that surrounded the little town, and she could see the tiny red causeway on which she had so often driven on her way home—to that hated home, silent, beautiful, empty Windyholme House—but on all that she must turn her back; she must face the other way on the seven miles' walk across the heathy road on her way to beg forgiveness and shelter in the Vicarage.

The train drew up at the little station. Jacinth hurried out past the ticket barrier, where she noted unconsciously that a new porter was stationed, and turning her face resolutely away from the hills, began her long and weary walk.

At the top of the first climb she stopped for a few moments and looked back. It was just about four o'clock; indeed, as she paused she

heard the old familiar tones of the town clock striking the hour. The soft grey haze, which in London had been yellow fog and rain, hung about the hills, flecked with crimson from the setting sun ; and presently that cleared away ; the whole beautiful outline of the Fulbrook hills became visible, the sky glowed like some marvellous jewel, and became one mass of purple, soft pale green, and dense red, and she could even catch the glitter of the heath-set pools and the tiny silver streams that in a mild winter make the whole of that lovely district musical with running water.

Close by, on the peat bank that fenced in the house from the road, a tiny, red waistcoated robin was singing as if his heart were full to overflowing with happiness. The air cleared in the sudden wonderful way it so often does at sunset in Dorsetshire, the dying sun gleamed brightly, while far away the thin blue smoke from the cottages climbed slowly up into the atmosphere, which was impregnated with that indescribable odour that once smelt is never forgotten, and that brings back to one in an

instant the whole panorama that stretches before him who pauses on that great hill summit and looks with an eye of love on the dear, delightful heath-land towards that range of hills that is the most exquisite place in all the world to those who have ever lived near enough to fall under the spell that they all unconsciously cast on all those who linger beneath their shade.

In one moment Jacinth knew that she, too, loved those swelling lines, those many-hued hill sides. Her heart throbbed, her eyes filled with tears, and in one instant she realized that she had never loved London, Mr. Francis Seymour—no, nor her own selfish self as she now loved Fulbrook, her husband, and her lost and neglected home.

The robin sang on. Then the soft air seemed to become colder; a chilly star glittered above the distant fir, the last glow of the sun seemed to turn the decoy pond in the hollow blood-red. Jacinth heard the distant cry of the pheasant as he settled himself in the branches of a tree in a far-off covert for

the night, and the yet more distant trot of a horse on the causeway ; and remembering how far she was still away from Bevercombe, and how dark the November nights are apt to be, she turned her longing eyes away from the hills and set out on her walk once more.

She knew every inch of the way, the very dips and undulations and twists and turns in the road were all familiar. Here was the place where Jock and Jenny invariably rushed down in order to tear up the opposite side of the dip at their most reckless pace. Here was the bridge on which Bob always paused, no matter what happened, to look out for a trout popularly supposed to be the "old gentleman" himself, and known to be the most wary of his wary tribe ; there the hedge where the first signs of Spring were always visible, and at last, at last, the gate that led into Bevercombe Woods, and the four cross roads which were all so familiar. Only one more heavy climb now, another dip and a few steps forward, and the lights of the village would be visible, the sparse lights cast

from very inferior paraffine lamps swinging in the small shop windows or placed in some cottage casement to guide the children home from the schools where she once had suffered so much from their tuition, and the glow from the blacksmith's forge by the "Cock and Bottle," the inn that caused Bob so much mental worry by reason of its nearness to the place where all the men in the place had to take their horses to be shod and all their carts to be mended and seen to generally.

There they all were, just exactly as they used to be ; the very puddles seemed the same, nothing was altered ; nothing, save her own self and her whole life.

It was no good to think any more. Jacinth went on quickly past the cottages and entered the lane which led round to the church and vicarage. It was quite dark now ; the stars were out, and the silence was intense. What was the time ? she wondered. It must be past six. Bob and Barbara would be playing with the children. She would stay about the house until she saw the light from the windows that



meant that Betty and Brian had retired. She must see Bob alone first. As she thought she dragged her tired limbs up the lane until she came within sight of the peaceful house that nestled in a little hollow just below the church, and was just, and only just, back from the village street.

As she paused there for an instant, she noticed the church was lighted up ; she could hear the organ, and then the tones of a familiar hymn. What was the meaning of it all ? Jacinth pressed her hands to her head. Oh ! it was November ; S. Andrew's day, perhaps ; yes, surely the last day of November belonged to the patron saint of Bevercombe ? It was the dedication festival : the vicarage would be full of strange clerics. How could she have been so foolish ? She would go back to Barford and wait there.

But she must rest first. She would creep into old Mrs. Cherritt's pew by the west door : no one would see her or recognise her ; and, hurrying up the steep path, Jacinth pushed the door open and entered the church she

had last seen on her wedding-day. It was very full; fortunately very dimly lighted; the lamps here were not much more brilliant than those in the village, and once ensconced in the high green-baize-lined pew which was Bob's bugbear and the pride and joy of the owner's heart, Jacinth sank down on her knees in the silence and prayed as she most certainly had never prayed before, being quite secure in her dark corner, and certain that for at least an hour she would remain undisturbed and unrecognised by the villagers, who all hated the pew as much as Mrs. Cherritt loved it, and, in consequence, gave it a wide berth.

The heat was intense, and the drowsy atmosphere was heavy with evergreens, chrysanthemums, and some hot-house flowers which Jacinth seemed to recognise. The service was loud and hearty, the hymns sung by bucolic voices, the tones of which almost shook the whole fabric; but presently the archdeacon of the diocese rose and began to preach in the soft, beautiful voice Jacinth knew so well, and she composed herself to

listen. The archdeacon was a great favourite of hers : his sermons were admirable, and he always spoke to the point. She hoped to hear from him something that would help her ; but presently his voice began to sound miles and miles away. Jacinth felt drowsier and drowsier. She tried to rouse herself. She heard something about S. Andrew, and something more about the church itself, and then Nature asserted herself. She stretched out her limbs quietly, and with one last futile struggle against fatigue, she fell asleep, profoundly, dreamlessly asleep, and remained in that condition all through the last hymn, the recessional hymn, and the final triumphal voluntary on the organ, which was accompanied by the clatter of heavy boots, as the congregation left the church, with the thousand and one noises inseparable from the dispersion of a large body of people ; for despite the smallness of Bevercombe and the natural craving for the homely feeling of the Dissenting chapel, every able-bodied person made it a point of honour to visit the parish church on the

dedication festival, and would have expected something awful to happen had anything save severe illness prevented their putting in an appearance then at their own church. Fortunately for Jacinth, who otherwise would probably have spent her night in the pew, Mr. Merridew was anxious about some of the decorations which had appeared to him perilously near the flames of the lamps ; and, therefore, before the church was finally closed for the night, he took his lantern and went by himself into every nook and corner of the beloved edifice. In his peregrinations, the green baize lining of Mrs. Cherritt's pew was recalled to his mind as the very place for sparks to linger. He opened the door and peered into the darkness.

In one moment he saw his sister. There was no doubt, no hesitation. The light of the lantern was turned direct on her face. For one instant he stood dumbfounded. Lord William was only across the road. What should he do ?

As he bent over Jacinth, eagerly scanning

her white and weary face, she stirred and opened her eyes ; they fell on Bob, who was gazing at her sternly, wondering what on earth he should do ; how he was to get her into the house without alarming her husband or upsetting Barbara and all his guests ; and, above all, wondering in what spirit she had returned to him. But the moment she saw her brother, Jacinth sank down on her knees, and covering her face with her hands, burst into a tempest of sobs and tears.

In an instant Bob's arms were round her. She was once more his dear little sister, the child-companion of his boyhood ; and before he knew what he was doing, his tears were mingled with hers, and he was thanking God in broken and confused sentences that at last, at last, the prodigal had returned to her home.

## CHAPTER VIII.

“THOSE WHOM GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER.”

FOR some moments Jacinth was quite unable to explain herself; then came out the whole miserable story: the temptation, the fall, the final struggle to do right, and the terrible life she had lived for the last few months. Nothing was kept back from her brother; and as he listened to her confession, and noticed how entirely Jacinth blamed herself and her own selfishness for all that had come upon her, his heart beat thankfully as he understood that she had learned her lesson fully, and that she might be safely trusted to return gratefully to the home that, had she known it, had been waiting for her all the time.

At last, when she had finished the unhappy story, she said, “I could bear it all no longer,

Bob dear ; I was obliged to see you and to hear something of you all again ; now I can go back to my work once more, and you'll write to me, won't you, and not let me feel quite as if I were dead and buried, and you had all forgotten me ?"

"Have you quite forgotten your husband?" asked her brother, putting his arm round her and drawing her closely to him.

Jacinth shuddered and put her hands over her face. "I could never bear to see him again," she whispered ; "he would kill me. I have forfeited every claim to his affection. He must hate and despise me, even more than I hate and despise myself."

"You do not even now understand that noble heart," replied her brother, sadly.

"How can I, when he has shut me out of it entirely?" asked Jacinth, with a return of her old spirit. "My leaving him made not one atom of difference to him. He carried through that measure of his, albeit, for all he knew, I had gone away to ruin, as well as despair. He never tried to find me, and

allowed me to slip away out of his life as if I were of no more account than a discharged servant would be. Oh!" added she, impulsively, as Bob looked at her in astonishment, and withdrew his sheltering arm just a little, "don't think I blame him, Bob dear, I am too much broken to blame any one; but it did seem just a little hard that he should never have tried, in the smallest way, to discover where I was, or whether I was dead or alive, and he must have known I had no money."

"How could he know that?" asked Bob. "But, Jacinth, don't let us speak of money; remember the real state of the case, and then I don't think you'll blame your husband one little bit. In the first place, there is nothing he does not know. He has often watched your goings out and your comings in; he knew of your room in the Euston Road; he heard once a week from Mr. Hogg about your welfare, and he has simply behaved to you like the Christian gentleman he is. He has protected your reputation step by step;



and the finest thing that ever was done was that speech of his, when, for all he knew, his home was wrecked and his honour abased to the ground : he stood in his place and did his work, while his heart was breaking and the whole fabric of his life seemed falling about his ears. A man's first duty is to his country. After long years of patient waiting, with the help of foes and friends alike, he was on the point of producing a measure that would revolutionize the whole face of England ; was he to falter because his wife had failed him ? Was he to break faith with his party because his nearest and dearest had deserted him ? Oh ! Jacinth, think of him ! You know him as no one else can know him ; and thank God on your knees, my child, that you have the honour and happiness of being his wife."

"Of having been his wife, you mean," replied Jacinth. "Oh ! Bob, tell me where he is, and how he is. What is he doing ; and does he ever talk of me ?"

"He talks of little else," answered Bob ; "he is ready to take you to his heart at any

moment, Jacinth, willing and ready to forgive all. But, dear little sister, don't go back to him yet, if you don't know your own heart really. Don't go back to him unless you really and truly love him as he deserves to be loved. Remember what I told you before you were married ; it is one thing to have happiness, quite another to be able to hold it. No one ever, in this life, had so much happiness put into her hands as you had on your wedding-day ; if you have it given to you again, can you hold it now ? Are your hands strengthened by trial ? Do you understand that there is nothing in this world to make up for the love of your husband, the delightful security of such a home as you have had given to you ?”

“ I think I do,” said Jacinth, looking down and blushing deeply. “ Bob,” she added, impulsively, “ I will confess to you openly, as if you were my priest as well as my brother, that I really now and only now know what it is to love my husband. I have thought of him, and him only, all these weary months and weeks, and there have been times when

I have felt that to see his kind eyes looking into mine again I would have gladly died; but I dare not see him, I should die of shame. When I remember the Judas part I have played, and how I betrayed him to his enemies, when I remember myself, I cannot believe he can ever forgive me, or look at me without loathing. Oh! how I wish I had known he cared to know where I was; I would never have left my work until he came to me himself, and told me he had forgiven me, and could not live without me. Now, mean, unhappy creature that I am, I am to sue to him for pardon when he does not want me, and will only take me home out of pity, not out of love. He cannot care for me, and will only forgive me because I am so wretched," and she sobbed miserably, her heart feeling as if it must break for very anguish.

"When the days are dull at Windyholme," said Bob, quietly, "when the rain falls, and William is busy with his work and his village, and comes in tired; when nothing happens, and you are reduced to dull despair; do you

think you will remember all this wretched time? Will you gird at the village, and impede all your husband's work by your extravagance ; or will you help him heart and soul as he deserves to be helped? Do you not know that he would have given his life to be able conscientiously to lavish all he had on you? Don't you think he grieved to refuse you anything he could give you, and don't you realize how much nobler a thing he wanted to make of life than you did? If you have recollected all this, and feel you can give him all the help he requires, the sympathy, the ready assistance, go back to his side, Jacinth, and beg him to take you home to his heart once more. You may be assured that that heart is aching for you, as yours must be aching for him. If you really love your husband, dear child, there can be nothing, not even the foolish, wicked past, between those whom God has joined together ; and I will bring him to you here, and let him tell you with his own lips how fully he forgives, how much he is willing to forget ;

but don't, don't go until you know from your heart that his interests are yours, and that you can honestly say you will help him as well as love him all his life."

"I would try, if he would forgive me, but he cannot," said Jacinth, sadly. "I hope this miserable time has made me better; but honestly, Bob, I don't think I shall ever love my fellow-creatures as he does, ever really love the country. It is my nature to be what I am; but I shall be silent now, and if he will ever forgive me I will help him as much as I can in every way; but I dare not face him, I dare not see him," and once more overcome with the sense of her position, Jacinth sank down on her knees in the pew and cried drearily.

At that moment Bob's ear, trained to catch every bird's note, every sound in that silent land, heard steps coming up the gravel-walk to the church. The door was pushed open, and Lord William himself came in, peering about in the darkness in search of the absent host. Presently he saw the glimmer of the

lantern and came hurriedly towards the high pew, feeling afraid that his brother-in-law had been taken ill. As he gazed over the top of the pew into the darkness, which was but feebly illumined by the small light, he could see Bob's anxious face and the dark form of the penitent at his feet.

No idea of whom that penitent might be entered his brain, but he saw that someone was in trouble, and he looked hastily at Bob, asking silently if he could be of any assistance.

In one moment Bob rose to his feet; chance had brought him there, he would leave the *dénouement* to chance; and putting the lantern into Lord William's hand, and muttering something about fetching Barbara, he hurried away, leaving his astonished brother-in-law alone in the church, with someone in the deepest despair and misery, judging from the heavy sobs that were rending her breast.

For about five minutes Lord William stood lantern in hand, looking down at the miserable creature at his feet. Then, presently, some turn of the head, some slight

movement made him pause. It must be, oh! it must be Jacinth at last—Jacinth from whom he had parted so unconsciously on that fearful May day, as it seemed to him, ages and ages ago. He knelt down in one moment beside the prostrate figure, and putting his arm round it, turning the face up to the light, he saw that it was really his wife, and forgetting all the past as if it had been nothing but a hideous nightmare, he clasped her closely to him, and kissed her pale tear-stained countenance as if he could never leave her alone again.

For a few instants Jacinth clung to him; her head lay on his shoulder, her hands clasped in his, her whole being filled with the intense rapture of knowing that her husband's arms were once more round her. In those few seconds she knew that, come what might, at last, at last, she knew what real love was, and that now, at all events, she understood how he had loved her. Now, oh! thank God, how she, too, loved him! Then she remembered; a flood of crimson blood coursed

through her veins and covered her face with burning, terrible blushes. She shrank away from his embrace, and with a bitter cry fell at his feet and hid her face. She could not look into those clear blue eyes; she could not gaze guiltlessly into the face of the man whom she had betrayed.

Lord William drew her hands down from her countenance, and raised it to his. "There is nothing I do not know, dear," he said; "nothing I want you to explain. Let the past be dead, be buried as far as we are concerned, and let us both begin our lives over again. We have both made mistakes; I as well as you. I should have been less absorbed in my work, less selfish. I should have remembered many things I had never thought of. Now, all I want you to do is to promise to love me, and to forget this dreary time, this dreadful division. You do love me now, Jacinth, don't you? I could forgive anything, I think, if you have learned by your sufferings what my feeble tongue could never teach you, to love me.



Jacinth rose from her knees and stood up by her husband's side. She put her hands to her eyes, as if she were dazed. She could not believe she had been forgiven, had not been thrust from that beloved presence as if she were the pariah she felt herself to be. She trembled all over, tried to speak, but could only cover her face with her hands again, and remain voiceless and trembling. Could she only tell him how she loved him she would die happily, but shame tied her tongue; the misery of self-abasement kept her silent.

For a second, Lord William paused irresolutely. Did she love him, or was he still only to her the selfish visionary who, to please himself, and to air his fads, condemned his wife to a quiet country life and comparative poverty? Would she once more stand between him and a successful carrying out of his life-scheme, or was it indeed his love, his wife, his helpmeet, he saw before him?

His love! Yes; alas! he must always love her; he could not help it. Love cannot

explain itself. It is there ; we are its slaves, we know not why ; and come what would, he should always adore the woman who had left him, as it seemed, with his worst enemy, who had come back to him, and now could not look him in the face. She must speak ; he must know the worst ; and drawing away her hands once more, he said, as quietly as he could : " Dearest wife, you must speak. Remember, I have forgiven all and forgotten all. If you will not love me, say so, and let us go our several ways as best we can ; but if you do, repay me for all these miserable months by a confession of that love. I shall forget all, all, if you can give me that blessed assurance."

Jacinth looked at him, her face blanched, her lips felt as dry as bones. She opened her mouth, she could not speak ; then, with a cry, she fell into those patient, loving arms, and her husband did not need words to tell him that at last his wife loved him, as, indeed, he deserved to be loved.

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It was about a month after this that Jacinth was in the hall at Windyholme in her old accustomed chair, the big dog's head on her lap, and Snuff, the brown nondescript, stretched out on the rug, his paws on the stone fender, his head between them, and his ears cocked, although he was simulating sleep, with one eye shut and the other open, lest he should be taken in the rear when he least expected it by a cat to whom he was as much attached as fear and a rather grudging sharing of his meals would allow. Just as of old, the south-west wind was roaring round the house, and the rain was angrily lashing the hall windows as if longing to come in.

As Jacinth sat there lazily waiting the return of her husband, her hands idly smoothing the head of the great setter which had been one of Lord William's companions during those dreary months of exile, her mind could not help dwelling on the past, that past of which her husband refused to hear, of which he exclaimed he would have no remembrance.

He had never mentioned Francis Seymour's

name to her, never asked one small explanation of that dreadful flight, a flight which, whenever she thought of it, made her heart beat furiously with a sick feeling of shame. But Jacinth had always felt that day and night it lay like lead on her soul, and that, some time, she must ask her husband if he knew what had really happened. She wanted to be quite sure he knew the worst, that he did not think the worst even blacker than it was.

It was Christmas-eve. Christmas, with all its many preparations for others, for the enormous tree at the Home, the big dinner to those who could never ask them back to-morrow, and the children's treat for Boxing Day; these were nearly all arranged for. Big parcels had come by every train to Barford, and Jacinth and Lord William had spent their days untying, arranging, and mentally distributing the contents, until both were alike tired of the mere touch of the string and the smell of the brown paper; but there were others still to think of: the clergyman in the village and his big family,

and many folk beside to whom Christmas meant nothing but bills and cold, and the general misery caused by stinted fires and food and insufficient raiment. The last parcel was being fetched from Barford now, but the green Yule so often found in Dorsetshire meant torrents of rain, and Jacinth had laughingly declared that she would stay at home, dry, ready for action the moment the carriage brought back all they still were wanting.

It was impossible not to think on such a night as this. On Christmas-eve, when conscience has an unpleasant way of pricking one, and making one think of "this time last year," and the progress or retrogression one has made, it is almost out of the question to remain silent and alone without remembering much that one would very gladly forget.

In Jacinth's case, she could only remember the last month : the joy with which Barbara had received her, the easy explanation of her return home just in time for the dedication festival, her pale face bearing out the legend

that her ill-health had necessitated the separation ; the coming home and finding out the loving way in which her rooms had been kept ready for her, the trifles she had thought so much of all in order, and every book, every garment in its own place ; and, finally, the quiet settling down to the old life with her husband, who ignored those months of separation, as if they had never been welcomed in state by the Duke and the two Duchesses, who were dying to discuss the past, and on the part of the elder Duchess to reprove her daughter-in-law for it, but who dare not do so after the manner in which Lord William himself appeared to have utterly passed it over as if it had never been. But even that last blessed month had had its drawbacks, for whenever her husband looked sad or was silent, Jacinth could not help wondering if he were thinking about those last wretched weeks, and whether he was once again pondering over the past, and, weighing her once more, had once more found her wanting. But she would not think of that. The relief of having

nothing to conceal, nothing to dread, was so great that she would only look on the bright side of the picture, would only think of what her life would be in the future.

Already she had begun to understand the spell cast by that wonderful silent hill district. She recognised that nowhere else could such marvellous colouring, such magnificent, ever-changing scenery be discovered, and she had really discovered that the industrial village could be most profoundly interesting, and that she could use her artistic gifts in helping the men and women there to manufacture goods which Mr. Hogg himself did not disdain to use, and which were rapidly coming into demand.

Good workmanship, originality of design, absolute honesty in every detail, the absence of the middleman, the utter disregard of "commissions" and other miserable methods of robbing the consumer, were all beginning to tell, and Lord William's demonstration of a man living among his own people and administering his land and his wealth for the

good of the greatest number, was already doing work that no amount of talking, no amount of speeches in the House would ever have accomplished, and silently, but forcibly, was revolutionizing the whole of that erstwhile dreary district.

As Jacinth thought of the increased trade to the Barford shops, the interest her husband had given to the dull commonplace lives of gossip, that were all the Barford ladies had to look forward to before he had enlisted them in all his schemes of pleasure and improvement for the townsfolk, villagers, and his own household alike, she began to be proud indeed of the man she had once despised and dared to attempt to thwart ; and as she recollected the way, the silent, beautiful way in which he had forgiven her entirely, and had, in her absence, protected her interests and her reputation, her face flushed and her heart beat quickly as she knew that now, and only now, did she fully comprehend what love meant.

Presently the setter's ears were cocked up,



Snuff rose from the fender, yawned, stretched, and trotted away to the front door, and in a few minutes Lord William came into the hall, shaking his wet coat and hat as if he had just come out of a pond. Jacinth saw in a moment that something had happened: her husband's voice shook, and he looked white and tired. She rose from her seat and came towards him.

“What is it?” she asked.

“What is what?” he answered, smiling; “if you mean the weather, it is just as bad as it can be. I left my macintosh outside, but nothing keeps out one of our south-westerly storms, I think, and I am as wet as if I had not had any other coat than this on, and John must take this;” and, so saying, he rang the bell, and threw the coat to the man who answered the summons; as he did so, an evening paper fell out of the pocket, on which Jacinth pounced eagerly.

“Why didn't you tell me you found the *St. James's* at the station?” she asked, lightly.

“I suppose you didn't wish me to be

strengthened in my pernicious politics?" and, so saying, she opened the paper and glanced quickly down the centre sheet. As she did so, Lord William caught the corner of her chair in his hand, held it tightly, as if to support himself, and, biting his lip, watched her narrowly as her eyes rapidly scanned the columns, and as she made light comments on the sparse amount of news to be found at that time of year.

Presently she paused, her face paled, and she looked apprehensively at her husband. She saw what was the matter in one moment: Francis Seymour was dead, had died quite suddenly at his desk in the office of the *Wasp*, with his head on his arms, sleeping like a little child. It was all over, then; her one last dread was removed; she should never meet him any more; never look upon his face again.

At last Jacinth turned to her husband. "Did you think I should mind?" she said, hanging down her head and whispering her words.

Lord William caught her in his arms and kissed her vehemently. "I did not know; the whole mystery of his fascination for you had always baffled me," he said. "Now I know I need not fear him, dead or alive. Jacinth," he added, drawing her down to his side on the sofa, "we have never mentioned that man's name since those unhappy months; I could never speak of him, somehow, and though I wanted to, I could not. Tell me now, as we sit here, safe, and alone in our own house, why did you allow him to influence you as you did; did you ever care for him really?"

Jacinth nestled closer to his side, and took his hands in hers. "I am going to tell you the real positive truth," she commenced. "Years ago, when I was seventeen, I loved him with all the romantic, idiotic passion of a school-girl; he was bound up with that beautiful time of my life when I believed in everyone, when the world was all before me, and I was going to do great things with my life. He was to help me; I was to be famous

as a great writer or a well-known beauty, or a painter or singer. I don't know how, exactly, but, somehow, every day I lived then was brighter and fairer than the last ; fuller of hope, fuller of pleasure, and in all this Francis Seymour was the guiding-star. I don't believe any girl ever dreamed as I did, ever believed in life as I did, ever believed in pleasure as I did then ! and beyond pleasure lay fame ! Fame, waiting to crown me, and call out my name before the world. You don't despise me too much, I hope, William ?" and Jacinth paused for a moment, and gazed at her husband. He drew her once more to him, and assured her that he only loved her, and could never despise what he held so dear.

Tears filled her eyes as she went on : " Then came the blow that seemed to shatter my whole life. I can't tell why, but somehow, my father represented God, aye, heaven, and the whole world to me. He had made his own name, his own position, and, despite a thousand drawbacks, had conquered the

world single-handed. He had won my mother against all the traditions of his race, and had been so entirely successful, so marvellously strong, that to me he was simply a tower of strength. When he killed himself, when I knew that his success was built up by a series of frauds, all went by the board—faith, hope, trust, everything—there was nothing left to live for. I could not care to win fame. If I were to do so, there would be inquiries into my parentage, and the usual whispers, ‘Oh, Merridew’s daughter. That man, you know, who shot himself and swindled thousands.’ I could not be beautiful, could not work hard, because if I did, my father’s evil deeds would rise against me and claim me as their own. I grew morbid. I could not be honest; in my veins ran the blood of a swindler. I could not be brave or good; a coward and a thief had given me life. How was I to be otherwise than what I am? And then Francis deserted me, naturally enough. I did not blame him; only it was another proof of what men really were; of what I might expect from the world.”

"Poor little thing, said Lord William. "I don't wonder at your being miserable. I only wonder you were not driven mad."

"I should have been had it not been for Bob," replied Jacinth. "He rescued me from the worst; but even he could not give me sense and strength, or make me lose the bitter sense of my miserable heritage. He might be good, he might be true; all the more reason why I should be worse; someone must have inherited my father's nature, and when I lived with him at Bevercombe, and saw how he was treated by the people round, my heart became harder than ever, and I determined to take from life everything I could get. I would not let anything save self come between me and my life."

"Then you met me?" said Lord William.

"Yes, I met you, and also then I met Mr. Seymour again. You offered me release from my surroundings; he came as a remembrance of a bright and beautiful dream. I married you, William, not loving you in the least, but using you as a means of escape

from a life so dull, so dreary, so narrow ; I think I must have taken any means that offered themselves to me ; and then I tried to turn you to my own purposes. But why go over the whole miserable story ? I failed, dear husband ; you conquered, and now, and now," she added, looking him full in the face, "let me tell you what you have done. The faith my father killed when he killed himself has come back to me, better, stronger, a thousand times more true than it ever was in those olden days. The false, feeble love I fancied I gave Francis Seymour has flickered out, and another has taken his place. The evil that my father did, thank God, has vanished, and in its place stand real faith in mankind, given back to me by you, my husband ; real love ; real, true, unselfish love, called into being by your selflessness, your forgiveness, your patient care for me, for me, who betrayed you, who left you for one who was not worthy to breathe the same atmosphere as you ; but, thank Heaven, something saved me from that worst fate.

I knew then I did not love my old lover, and at that supreme moment, when the solid earth seemed slipping from me, and ruin and despair stared me in the face, I saw to whom my love was given, and though I fancied I could never, never come back to you again, I saved myself by the magic of your name."

"And you are content, now ; are happy," said Lord William, holding her fast ; "even though the season in London may never be anything to us ; even though you may have to rusticate among the Dorset hills all your life, and may never be heard of beyond the bounds of Windyholme? Will my love be enough for you, dear ; for always, do you think?"

Jacinth paused for one moment. "I shall always love my London," she said, brightly, "but my London can get on quite well without me, and I am beginning to hope that Windyholme cannot. After all, William, you are my ambition, my future now, and where you are will be my happiest place ; you



have conquered me so entirely, so utterly, that I place myself in your hands, and will do and be exactly what you want ; but have patience with me, help me to be good, and don't shut me out of your plans. I can't like them all," she added, smiling ; " I don't revel in the society of the dear Barford ladies, and sometimes I may pine for something beyond that big factory room ; and the society of Jones, Brown and Robinson in the village may pall ; then I will come to you and ask you to take me somewhere fresh, if only that I may bring back new ideas to the people here who cannot get away ; and I shall expect you to pack up at once, cheerfully, and start off with me on a honeymoon journey where nothing, not even the village, can come between us. I think then we shall be very, very happy all our lives ; much happier than I, for one, deserve."

Lord William looked down at his wife's face, and, raising it in his hands, he gazed steadfastly into her eyes. Then he said : " Out of much tribulation we have found our

rest, and if some day, as I hope may happen, we have others to think of, love, besides ourselves, we must first teach the lesson we have learned, that happiness, to be real, must be earned, and that no true home can be built without love, love for others, love for the whole wide world outside our doors ; and that the duty of every citizen is so to administer whatever talents or wealth he possesses that the greatest number may be benefited by his life on this earth. We cannot give our children a better heritage than the village at Windyholme, Jacinth."

"You forget my Conservative proclivities," she replied, smiling and blushing at her husband's last remark.

"They will be neither Conservative nor Liberal, neither Whig nor Tory, but a good mixture of both," he answered, laughing. "Above all, they shall be true socialists. If they have wealth or happiness, teach them to hold it in trust for as many as they can benefit, and, finally, let Bob teach them his favourite theory that many people have

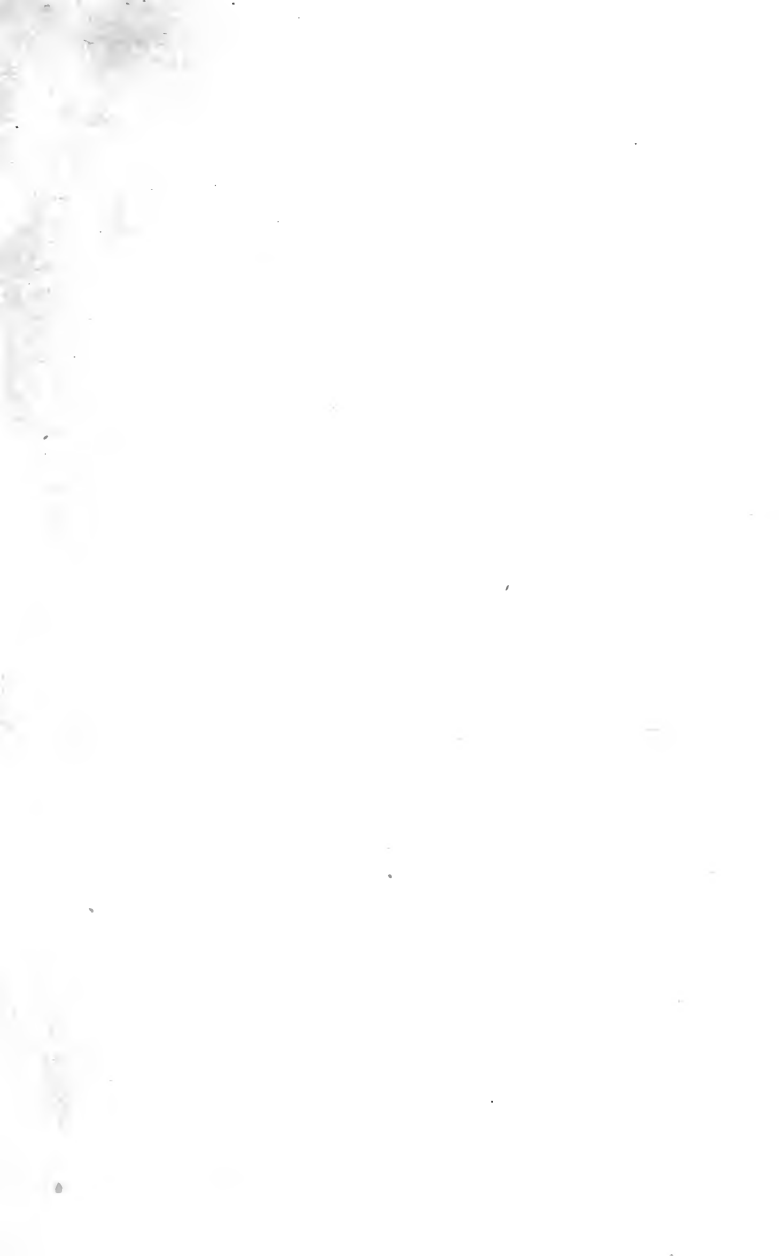
happiness, but very few folks hold what they were meant to retain all their lives; but here's dinner-time, and I have a hundred and one things to do. The past is dead, and we have only the future before us. What! tears, Jacinth," he added, as he saw her eyes fill, as they fell once more on the paper she still held. "You are not weeping for Seymour, surely?"

"Yes I am," she answered boldly, "and for his poor, silly little wife. There are some sad hearts in England this Christmas-time, William, and hers is one of the saddest, for she loved him really. What should I be enduring now had I lost you as she has lost her husband?"

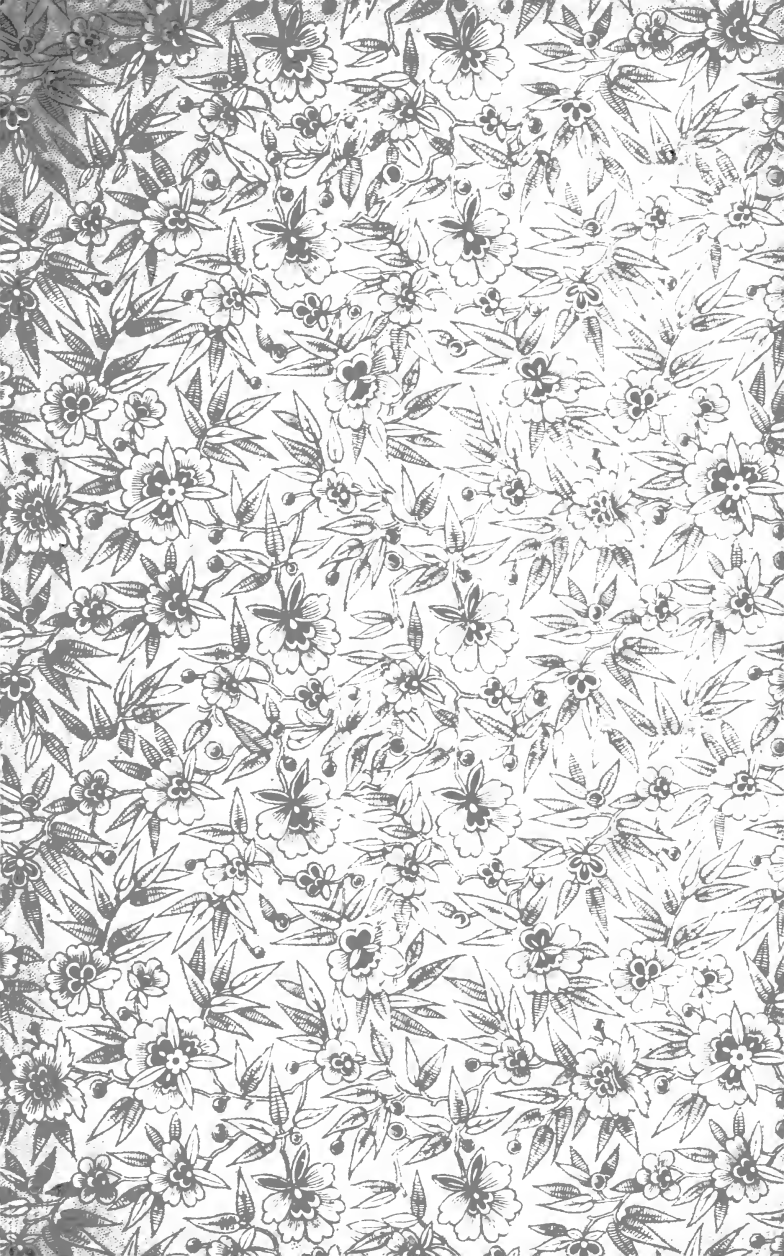
"A truce to sad thoughts," replied Lord William, recklessly throwing the paper into the big fire on the hearth. "It is Christmas-eve, and I want to be very happy to-night. Flora will cry a little and then someone else will console her. You and I are different; we have our real happiness now, and I will hold you and it against the world;" and, so

saying, Lord William put his arm round his wife's waist, and, followed by the ubiquitous Snuff, went up the wide oak staircase towards their room, where the roaring wind and rain outside the house contrasted strangely with the warmth, love and happiness which reigned supreme within.

THE END.







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